

DECEMBER 1998



interZone

£3.00

138

'Night's Damsel'

**Storm Constantine
& Eloise Coquio**

plus stories by

Tony Ballantyne

Lawrence Dyer

Robert Reed

Nicholas Waller

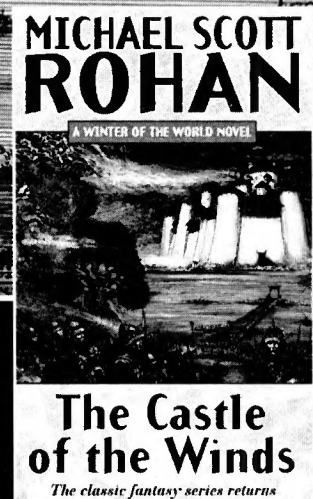
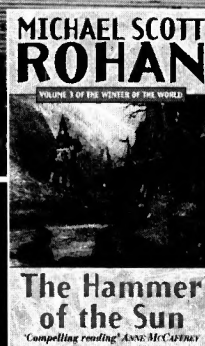
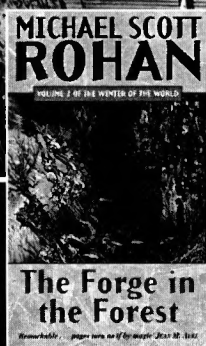
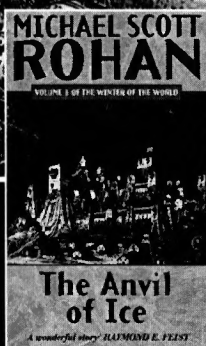
and an interview with

Kristine Kathryn Rusch



MICHAEL SCOTT ROHAN

THE WINTER OF THE WORLD

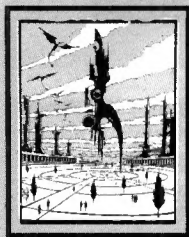


THE CLASSIC FANTASY SERIES RETURNS

Available from bookshops now



<http://www.orbitbooks.co.uk>



Vignettes by SMS

Editor & Publisher
David Pringle
Deputy Editor
Lee Montgomerie
Assistant Editors
Paul Annis,
Andy Robertson,
Andrew Tidmarsh

Consultant Editor
Simon Ounsley
Advisory Editors
John Clute,
Malcolm Edwards,
Judith Hanna

Graphic Design and Typesetting
Paul Brazier

Subscriptions Secretary
Ann Pringle

Interzone
217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL,
United Kingdom.

All subscriptions, back-issue orders,
general correspondence, books for
review, and enquiries about advertising
should be sent to this address.

Subscriptions:
£32 for one year (12 issues) in the UK.
Cheques or postal orders should be
crossed and made payable to *Interzone*.

Overseas subscriptions are £38,
payable by International Money Order.

Payments may also be made by
MasterCard, Visa or Eurocard: please
send your cardholder's name, initials
and address written in block letters,
with card number, card expiry date and
signature. (Note: overseas payments will
be charged at the £ sterling rate.)

Alternatively, American subscribers
may pay by dollar check, drawn on a
U.S. bank, at \$60. (All copies to other
continents are sent by Air Saver, i.e.
accelerated surface mail.).

Lifetime subscriptions:
Lifetime subscriptions: £320 (UK);
£380 (overseas); \$600 (USA).

Back-issues
of *Interzone* are available at £3 each in
the UK
(£3.50 each overseas), postage included.
(US dollar price: \$6 Air Saver.)

All issues are in print *except* numbers
1-2, 4-13, 15-24, 31, 33, 37, 51 & 60.
Order them from the address above.

Submissions:
stories, in the 2,000-6,000 word range,
should be sent singly and each one
must be accompanied by a stamped
self-addressed envelope of adequate
size. Persons overseas please send a
disposable manuscript (marked as
such) and two International Reply
Coupons. We are unable to reply to
writers who do not send return postage.

No responsibility can be accepted for
loss or damage to unsolicited material,
howsoever caused. Submissions should
be sent to the Brighton address above.

InterZone

December 1998

138

science fiction & fantasy

CONTENTS

Fiction

NIGHT'S DAMOZEL Storm Constantine & Eloise Coquio <i>Illustrations by Dominic Harman</i>	6
THE SIXTH VNM Tony Ballantyne	22
THE NEW SYSTEM Robert Reed	26
FRAME BY FRAME Nicholas Waller	37
COLONIES Lawrence Dyer	44

Features

INTERACTION <i>Readers' Letters</i>	4
ANSIBLE LINK David Langford	16
OUT OF THE PULPHOUSE Kristine Kathryn Rusch <i>interviewed by Jayme Lynn Blaschke</i>	17
MUTANT POPCORN <i>Film Reviews by Nick Lowe</i>	32
TUBE CORN <i>TV Reviews by Wendy Bradley</i>	35
UNLUCKY STARR AND THE OMISSION OF VENUS Gary Westfahl	51
BOOK REVIEWS Brian Stableford, Paul J. McAuley, Chris Gilmore, Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh, Nigel Brown and David L. Stone	53

Cover by Jim Burns for Robert Silverberg's *Lord Prestimion* (courtesy of HarperCollins) – see artist's note on page 5.

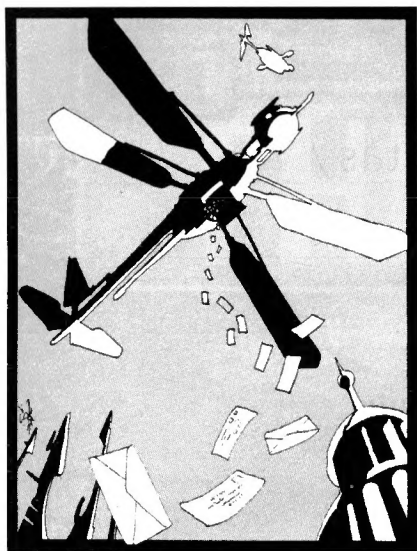
Published monthly. All material is © *Interzone*, 1998, on behalf of the various contributors

ISSN 0264-3596

Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

Trade distribution: Diamond Magazine Distribution Ltd.,
Unit 7, Rother Ironworks, Fishmarket Road, Rye,
East Sussex TN31 7LR (tel. 01797 225229).

Bookshop distribution: Central Books,
99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN (tel. 0181 986 4854).



SLOPPY SCIENCE?

Dear Editors:

In his review of Stephen Baxter's new novel *Moonseed* (which I haven't seen), Chris Gilmore dismisses Baxter's assertion that a supernova 100 light years away could cause severe radiation damage on Earth (reviews, *Interzone* 136, pages 56-57). Gilmore then appears to argue, based on his own calculations, that a supernova at a distance of five light years might indeed lead to large-scale extinctions, with the damage being done by light and heat rather than gamma-ray emissions. But this is not the end of the story. Most of the energy emitted by a supernova is in the form of neutrinos – subatomic particles which react so weakly with normal matter that they are usually of no consequence. Amazingly, the famous supernova of 1987 in the Large Magellanic Cloud produced a detectable spike of neutrinos in at least one of the experiments normally used to monitor neutrino emissions from the sun. More amazingly still, there's enough water trapped in the combined eyeballs of the entire human population that perhaps one person alive in 1987 could have seen an optical flash caused by neutrino-induced Cherenkov radiation in his or her own eyeball!

But a nearby supernova would shower us with a vastly more neutrinos. One at 30 light years, for instance, would produce a flux 25 million times as great as that from 1987A. It's been argued that a slightly nearer supernova (20 light years or closer) could have killed off the dinosaurs by bombarding them with enough neutrinos to cause cancer – inducing about 12 malignant

cells per kilogram of organic matter, which becomes a problem if you're as large as a T. Rex. Neutrinos may not be the only problem, either – cosmic rays from a supernova within 30 light years might remove 90% of the ozone layer, allowing our own sun to kill us.

All of the above suggests that, at 100 light years, Baxter's supernova is a bit too far away to do harm – and Gilmore's objection is valid – but there's certainly little agreement on exactly how close a supernova would have to be before it became a problem. There's surely enough room for error in the theories that Baxter can be excused Gilmore's accusation of sloppy science, in this instance. No one in recorded history has actually seen a supernova go off, and who – given the track record of agreement between astronomical theory and observation – would honestly want to participate in the experiment, even at a distance of 100 light years? I certainly wouldn't!

(Further reading: Paul Murdin's excellent *End in Fire* [1990] from Cambridge University Press, which includes the definitive treatment of the "eyeball" anecdote mentioned above.)

On another matter, I agree with your comment in the "Books Received" (*IZ* 136, page 64) – why hasn't anyone made a TV series out of James White's novels? This had occurred to me as well, and it makes even more sense when you think how many episodes of *Star Trek* have a quasi-medical theme. I grew up with the Sector General books – those lovely 1970s Corgi paperbacks, with the cloth covers. Funnily enough I seem to recall reading recently that someone is making a "docs in space" series, but it didn't look to have any connection with James White.

Alastair Reynolds
Noordwijk-aan-Zee
Netherlands

BLACK STAR RISING

Dear Editors:

Good to learn from your "Books Received" pages (*Interzone* 135, p63) that you received the book. *A propos* the comments there, I have little control over how my publisher markets the work or how they categorize it, but rest assured I have no wish to be "the black Jeff Noon"; for one, *Black Star Rising* is more classical science fiction than Jeff Noon's "avant-pop" or "post-cyberpunk" novels. This is deliberately so, since I could find no

classical science fiction at all written by UK black writers, and wanted to do something there first. *Black Star Rising* is retro-sci-fi in that respect!

P.S. I love the "Ansible Link" page of *Interzone*.

Pete Kalu
Manchester

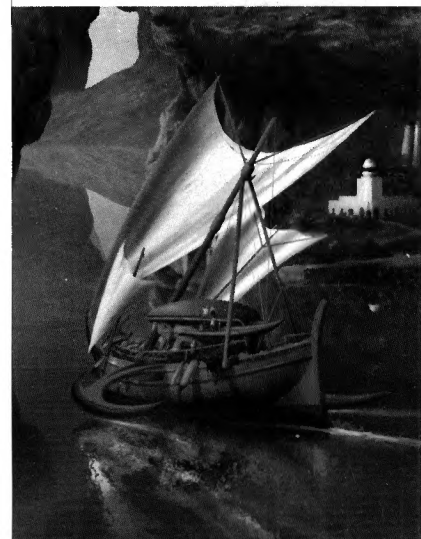
Dear Editors:

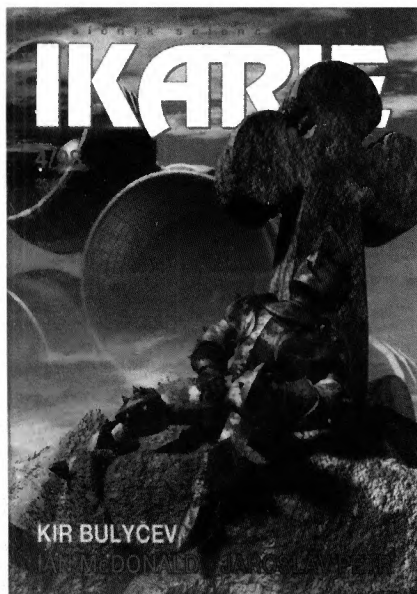
Regarding David Alexander's proposal of an *Interzone* website, ("Interaction," *IZ* 135) I'm afraid I'm going to have to place my tick in the "decidedly negative" column. I believe the fact that *IZ* doesn't have a website actually makes people more eager to read the magazine. Many other mags and/or society publications have websites, where the reader is (occasionally) allowed to see extracts from the forthcoming issues. Where's the fun in reading half a magazine before it comes out? If anyone is in need of *IZ* knowledge/history they're best advised to go visit Greg Egan's comprehensive contents page (updated monthly) at: <http://www.netspace.net.au/~gregegan/IZ/index.htm>

David L. Stone
Ramsgate
(dulwich1@compuserve.com)

Cover story: Jim Burns writes –

"The painting for Robert Silverberg's *Lord Prestimion* was completed entirely on an Apple PowerMac 8500 using Photoshop. It was the first time I'd been given permission by a publisher (in this case, HarperCollins UK) to produce a piece of work in the newfangled digital way. I've gone on to produce several more since and I think the Mac is going to remain an extremely important tool in my studio henceforward. The important thing for me was to avoid that 'computer-generated' look and to try as closely as possible to emulate my own more traditional, painted style."





ANTHOLOGIES AND SUCH

Dear Editors:

In response to your comments to my letter in *Interzone* 135:

Anthologies – I love them, possibly even more than I do single-author short story collections. I've read, and bought, a stack in my time and your comments sent me browsing through my chaotic library (we've only been in the house two years, give me a chance) to rediscover *Continuum*. That was an original idea I really enjoyed, but like an idiot I went and loaned them and now I only have number 3. When will I ever learn. Amongst other foolish lends, I've still got to retrieve Zelazny's *Lord of Light* from a so-called friend.

Foreign – i.e. non-English-language – sf is something I'd like to see more of, and there's been precious little lately. If there was such an anthology, I'd definitely buy it. Sf and fantasy are driven by speculation and imagination, two reasons why people read and write in those genres. It seems reasonable to expect I'm going to get a lot of entertainment from people who live and think in different parts of the world, with different perspectives and urges.

I remember what there was of the East European work, such as the Strugatsky Brothers, being fairly political. A few years ago I was in contact with an English-language Lithuanian sf group in Vilnius. I used to send them western sf books. I don't remember them publishing stories, but there was (is?) a Czech sf magazine at the time. I've noticed recently that a lot of sf/fantasy art is coming

from Europe. Is this a trend, or just that I've noticed because I'm getting more involved with things now? *Albedo* 1 #15 had a particularly nice cover by Bauke Muntz (Netherlands).

In *Interzone* 135 I enjoyed Tanith Lee's sensitive story "Jedella Ghost," was a bit put off by the back-slapping "humans are wonderfully unique and special" ending of Timons Esaias's "The Mars Convention," and loved John Whitbourn's "In the Name of Allah..." The magazine is sometimes good, sometimes infuriating, occasionally great, never boring.

Dave Gullen

dave@gullen.demon.co.uk

Editor: There certainly is a Czech sf magazine. It's called *Ikarie*, and it seems to be going great guns. Among other things, it has published Czech versions of a number of *Interzone* stories. There is also a Polish magazine, *Nova Fantastyka*, which likewise has carried translations of some of our stuff. These are both monthlies, which is heartening – and which is why I used careful phrasing, some time ago, when I made the claim that *Interzone* is the last English-language monthly fiction magazine (a claim which no one has refuted, by the way): I was well aware that these two foreign-language magazines existed. There are probably others, but we see these two regularly.

Dear Editors:

A small note from one of your Dutch readers. Let me begin by saying that of course I'll renew my subscription to *Interzone*! It's one of the best (probably the best) English-language magazines there is, in my humble opinion...

In the March issue (number 129) of *IZ*, David Pringle mentions in his editorial a bimonthly magazine named *Odyssey*, edited by Liz Holliday – "a new rival," as he calls it. Since I'm always open to new things, especially magazines concerning sf and fantasy, I would like to receive some more information about this magazine. Could you give me an address through which I can contact *Odyssey*? I would be very much obliged.

The above is exactly what I (personally, that is) am missing in *Interzone* – the addresses of other British magazines. In every *IZ* there's always some new magazine that is fleetingly mentioned, but further information is almost never given. I mean, there is a "Books Received" section in *IZ*, so could there not be a section called "Magazines Received"? Even if *IZ* itself doesn't really review magazines, the least you could do is to mention the addresses of the mag-


azines you do receive and mention in *Interzone*. I am curious as to why *IZ* doesn't have such a section, so please, give me an answer. Maybe there is a good, solid reason for it which I don't know about.

Marcel de Graaff

Montfoort

Netherlands

Editor: As I stated in the letter column of *IZ* 131, the address for *Odyssey* (edited by Liz Holliday) is c/o Partizan Press, 816-818 Leigh-on-Sea, Essex SS9 3NH. As for magazine reviews, we do run some, on a fairly regular although perhaps not frequent enough basis, by Andy Cox – his most recent piece appeared last issue, number 137 (after your letter was written) – and Andy always gives the addresses for the magazines he reviews. We're hoping he'll get round to reviewing some issues of *Odyssey* soon, but so far he says he has had difficulty obtaining the magazine. Perhaps he, and anyone else who is interested, should look for it in gaming shops, since Partizan Press is mainly a games-related company. On the other hand, sf book-dealer Roger Peyton tells us that *Odyssey* is available and selling well in his Birmingham city-centre shop, *Andromeda* – c'est la vie!



The 32nd Annual Workshop
June 13 - July 24, 1999
Writers-in-Residence:
 Karen Joy Fowler
 James Morrow
 Tim Powers
 Mike Resnick
 Michaela Roessner
 Judith Tarr
Editor-in-Residence:
 Scott Edelman

Deadline for Receipt of Application:
 April 1, 1999

For more information contact with SASE
 Clarion 1999 c/o Mary Sheridan
 E-185 Holmes Hall
 Lyman Briggs School
 Michigan State University
 East Lansing, MI 48825-1107



Night's Damozel

Storm Constantine
&
Eloise Coquio

On the morning of her arrival, Samuel wandered out into his garden. Already the sun was blistering and the still, clammy air threatened later storms. He walked along the shaded walkways where, as it dripped through the dense canopy of leaves, the burning yellow light turned to cool amber. His heart felt too large within its cage of bones. Where was the joy with which he should be greeting his new bride? Standing in the sunlight, he shivered.

Samuel was a quiet man with few friends, and those who had somehow stuck to his life since childhood now lived far away. He saw them only once a year, in early summer, when for a month, he would travel overseas. His life was marked only slightly by the presence of others; he had a single servant, a bad tempered woman named Hesta, who lived on a nearby farm. She visited him daily, but Samuel rarely saw her. He left her coins as wages once a week and consumed her indifferent cooking with neither relish nor disgust.

Few other visitors ventured up the long, tree-shuttered driveway to the house, yet Samuel never felt lonely. He had companions. His garden was full of them: nearly a hundred different species of rare and exotic plants. They were his passion. They spoke to him without words, and listened to his most secret confidences without interrupting. They indulged him with gifts; dark, sticky fruit and flowers whose petals felt as soft as the skin of children. Their names were beautiful:

Dancing Bride, whose spray of small white blooms concealed a bitter nectar that stopped the heart; Severia, whose juices thinned the blood so effectively, a simple scratch might result in slow death; Lady Anne's Pearls, whose dull-bloomed berries nestled in a grey-green nest of prickled leaves, whose taste was sweet yet paralysed the lungs. There were many more languishing in darkness beneath the evergreens, hugging their secret lives to themselves, or wantonly sprawling over the lichen walls of the sun garden. Often Samuel would lie among them and inhale their narcotic scent until his head throbbed and pulsed. During his annual travels, he had gathered his dark ladies from every corner of the world. But this year, he had journeyed to the hot land of Mewt, where he'd cut for himself a different kind of flower, and soon she would be here.

Samuel's steps were slow, even dragging. He wondered how he would tell the green ladies of his wife's arrival. He should have spoken before, but had sensed the displeasure his news would invoke. They would be anxious, for they were used only to his company.

There was a queen to Samuel's kingdom and her name was Night's Damozel. Her velvet blooms, of imperial purple, reared on tall, slender necks from a coronet of long, silver-furred leaves. Her pollen could be deadly, yet to one familiar with her charms, it imparted a sweet euphoria. Samuel had long acquaintance with the Damozel and spent many a balmy evening with his



Illustrations by Dominic Harman

head in her royal lap, inhaling the sparkling dust that drifted down from her open hearts. Now, he came again to her court in a grove of ancient yews. Little sunlight reached her, yet her bower was always temperate. Her maids of honour were a riot of cobalt ground poppies. Swollen bees hung drunkenly above her blooms, droning low and deep.

Samuel knelt before her, his head bowed. He felt the sun reach down with attenuated fingers between the needles of the yews and touch his neck. He told the Damozel his news.

He had first seen Xanthe in twilight, standing above him on a balcony at the villa of one of his acquaintances. Framed by tall, sputtering candles, she had been holding a long-stemmed glass to the side of her face, gazing out at the dark sea beyond the villa gardens. The ocean breeze lifted tendrils of her hair and they coiled around her face and shoulders like questing vipers. She was lovely: tall, slender, her body swaying slightly as she meditated upon the approaching night. Samuel's heart was at once captivated for he saw within this woman a similarity to the green ladies who populated his garden. Like them, she seemed remote, silent, rooted to the spot.

On the terrace near the cliffs, where a host of people mingled, and food and wine grew damp and warm respectively in the heavy air, he sought out his hostess,

a duchess named Sythia. She stood at the centre of a group of guests amusing them with gossip. Samuel sipped his wine and made what he hoped were discreet enquiries about the woman on the balcony. Sythia smiled conspiratorially and led Samuel to one side. "You speak of Xanthe. You like her? Of course you do. She is charming. A temptation to many men."

Samuel, unused to such direct words, felt himself grow hot. "She is interesting," he replied, which was exactly what he felt.

Sythia's smiled widened. "You would like to meet her, of course."

Samuel was irritated by Sythia's demeanour. He knew the people who thought themselves his friends had despaired of him ever finding a mate. Well-meaning older ladies had often told him he was a well-favoured man and had many admirers, but once he saw the women whose eyes he'd caught, he had to flee. They seemed so pink and fleshy, so clumsy. Now, his fumbling enquiries about Xanthe would soon be known to all the company. The morsel of information would be relished as much as the rare, salty shellfish that lay dismembered on the duchess's table.

"In truth, I know very little about the lady," Sythia confessed as she cut through the throng of guests that cluttered her garden. "I met her at a soirée some weeks back, and like you, felt my curiosity stir. Nobody knows her. She is an enigma, and a lovely complement to any

gathering. I have invited her here three times already.”

Sythia paused beneath the balcony where Xanthe still contemplated the scenery. The duchess called her name and, languidly, Xanthe directed her attention towards the sound. Her face remained expressionless. “My dear,” said Sythia, in a voice of constrained excitement, “would you come down here for a moment. There is someone who wishes to meet you.”

With neither words nor smile, Xanthe put down her glass on the rail of the balcony and descended the steps that flanked the house, her movements precise yet elegant. Then she stood before them, towering over Sythia, looking Samuel directly in the eye. She was dressed in a long, finely-pleated garment, the colour of ripened corn, that clung to her body like scales. Her dark, straight hair hung lustrously over her shoulders. Her skin seemed dusty, and Samuel instinctively knew it would feel smooth and dry to his touch. He wanted to shrink from Xanthe’s overt scrutiny, yet simultaneously wanted to drown in her unwavering gaze.

He could no longer remember how Sythia had affected introductions. His memory had discarded any words that had been exchanged beyond that initial overture, but he could still recall in detail the smashing of the sea below, and the scent of the night-blooming vines, and Xanthe’s private smile as she observed, through her dark, slanting eyes, his developing infatuation.

In a dry, barely interested kind of way she apparently decided to collude in his desires. Later that same night, after most of the guests had retired to bed, or else had fallen where they stood among the empty glasses, she led Samuel to a bare promontory and here, beneath the swelling moon, discarded the sheath of her dress, to reveal a long, sinuous body whose flesh was cool yet supple. She had no inhibitions whatsoever, although Samuel, being devoid of experience in these matters, wondered whether all women were so open in this regard.

There followed a week of intoxicated passion, of fever and of joy. In the mornings, Xanthe would leave Samuel’s bed and go to sun herself upon the balcony, kneading into her skin fragrant oils that were absorbed almost immediately to leave a matte sheen. In the afternoons, while the other guests dozed after lunch, she and Samuel would walk into the nearby town, and drink cold, tart wines beneath the shade of awnings outside sleepy inns. She did talk of herself, of her dreams and expectations. Her voice was low, husky, with a slight lisp. Her family were rich, she told Samuel, and she was an artist. She was amused by Sythia’s patronage, but was happy to enjoy the benefits of the friendship. “I love her house,” Xanthe said. “The rocks around it retain such heat.”

At the end of that week, Samuel had made up his mind: he wanted Xanthe as a wife. One afternoon, as they paused in their daily walk at a shoreside inn, he became emboldened by wine, and took hold of her hands across the table. “Xanthe, be my bride.”

She looked at him inscrutably for a few moments, then said, “If you like.”

Just a few days later, they married in a small, mountain temple, and afterwards Sythia threw a banquet in their honour. Then, Xanthe had returned to her family estate to organize the packing of items she wished

to transport to her new home, while Samuel had travelled back across the sea to his homeland of Tarbonnay, where he would prepare his demesne for her arrival.

“And today she comes,” Samuel told the Damozel. “I pray you will love her as I do.”

The afternoon had dulled and seemed to fall silent; the bees had tumbled away, and not even a leaf stirred in the bower. Then, as Samuel raised his head, the sun reappeared from behind a cloud and the Damozel’s stately blooms turned slowly away from him. She seemed to gaze haughtily at the sky.

“Fear not, my lady,” he murmured. “My consort will attend you as I have. She is eager to meet you and tend you. She will be a mother to you. It is a wife’s duty to love all that her husband loves.”

The sun rolled behind the first black cloud of the approaching storm, and stayed there. First the Damozel, then her hand-maidens, slowly bowed their heads once more and stared at Samuel with the blind eyes of their velvet hearts. He had never lied to them before.

Samuel did not bother to make any special effort over his appearance to greet his new wife. He spent a few hours tending his plants, then, pausing only to wipe his hands on a dirty rag, bound back his long hair with a piece of twine, and positioned himself in his gloomy study to await Xanthe’s arrival. His eyes skittered with discomfort over the disarray in the room, as if becoming aware of it for the first time. Perhaps he should have hired a team of cleaners to prepare the house for her arrival, but it was not his habit to fuss about his environment. After the last of his parents’ retainers had left, complaining the house was too large for so small a staff to cope with, he had never engaged anyone but Hesta, who in fact did very little for her money. Still, domestic matters would be Xanthe’s province. He smiled to himself. Previously, he had not considered that particular benefit of taking a wife.

After Xanthe did not arrive at the expected hour, Samuel started to feel impatient. Rain began to fall heavily upon the garden, which did not improve his mood. Hesta presented herself at the doorway of his study. She was a large woman with resentful eyes. “Is she here yet?” she enquired rather disrespectfully.

“No,” Samuel answered shortly. “Prepare a cold supper and leave it in the kitchen.”

Hesta grunted and departed, perhaps relieved she would not be required to stretch her culinary talents for the benefit of a new wife.

Samuel waited for the storm to pass, then went outside, where the air was cool and damp. He resolved to walk down the long, winding driveway and if Xanthe had not made an appearance by the time he reached the road, he would lock the gates. It was as if the events of his recent holiday had been a dream, a pleasant dream, but one ill-destined to continue. Now, it seemed inconceivable that Xanthe, with her foreign air, would settle successfully in his home. He must have been bewitched in Mewt; lulled by the hot, perfumed air and the long, lazy nights.

At the gates, Samuel put his hands upon the wet, rusty rods and peered down the road that led to the nearest town. He saw her then, walking ahead of a wagon like a common farm girl. She wore a sun-coloured, loose

dress that brushed her ankles, and her face was shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat. She walked languorously, clearly in no particular hurry to reach her destination. Sometimes, she paused to sniff a roadside flower or turned to say something to the wagon driver. Not until she'd nearly reached Samuel's gates, did she look ahead, notice him and raise a languid hand to wave.

"You are late," Samuel said churlishly.

"Yes," she agreed and came forward to lay a cool hand on his arm. "Open the gates then, Samuel, so the wagon can carry my effects to the house."

The wagon heaved past them; it was not heavily laden. Xanthe hooked her hand through Samuel's arm and they strolled up the driveway behind the wagon. Their feet crunched upon gravel that was softened by clumps of dark moss. "This is a rich and fertile land," she remarked, "but I trust it is not too cold in winter. I thrive only in heat."

Samuel ignored these words and snapped. "You are now the lady of this house, Xanthe. You should have hired a proper carriage in the town, rather than arrive here on foot like a slattern."

Xanthe laughed and squinted at him sidelong. "Why, Samuel, you look like a farmhand yourself. There are seeds in your hair and dirt beneath your nails. Cheer up. Don't be irritable just because I chose to enjoy a walk and acquaint myself with the land. I am here now." She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

Her touch kindled heat within him. "This is your home now, my love. We shall be happy here." The dream took on flesh once more.

Xanthe uttered an appreciative murmur as the house appeared around a bend in the drive. The garden at the front was rather neglected; a sweep of waving grasses, hedged by willows. The house itself lay like a sleeping lizard in its grounds; a grey sprawl of wings, buttresses and towers that had formed over the generations, from architectural additions by Samuel's ancestors. It was scaled with a myriad tiny windows and its walls were lazily uneven, corseted with immense wooden beams. The late afternoon sun, still watery from the storm, washed the lichened walls with rusty light and gilded the window panes. "So warm," Xanthe breathed. "So warm."

The heat of summer, however, seemed not to have penetrated the hall of the house, and here the air felt uncomfortably cold and damp. The house smelled of its own age – once a familiar, comforting odour to Samuel, but now somehow repellent. He noticed his wife shiver a little. "The place needs a good airing," he said lamely. "It was shut up while I was away."

Xanthe glanced at him, but made no comment, even though Samuel could guess she thought the house had

been neglected for rather more than a month. The wooden panels of the hall, which once had burned with the sheen of bees' wax, now looked dull and sticky. The floor tiles were obscured by years of accumulated mud, trampled in by Samuel from the garden. Xanthe ventured forward cautiously, apparently to examine her surroundings.

Samuel called, "Look out," but it was too late. Xanthe had stepped into a tray against the wall and had scattered its contents.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I've spilled all your seeds," Xanthe said, adding pointedly, "I didn't see them." She bent to brush them up but Samuel hurried to her side and stopped her hand.

"Don't touch it, my love!"

Xanthe frowned. "Why not?"

Samuel took her hand in his. "It's poison. A hazard of living in the country, I'm afraid. We have a problem keeping these old places free of vermin."

"Vermin," said Xanthe, flatly, straightening up.

"Mice," Samuel explained. "Even rats – not that they often come this far into the house, of course, but the cellars, the old larders... I have to keep poison down."

Xanthe raised an eyebrow. "Don't worry. Rodents don't scare me. They are too small to inspire fear."

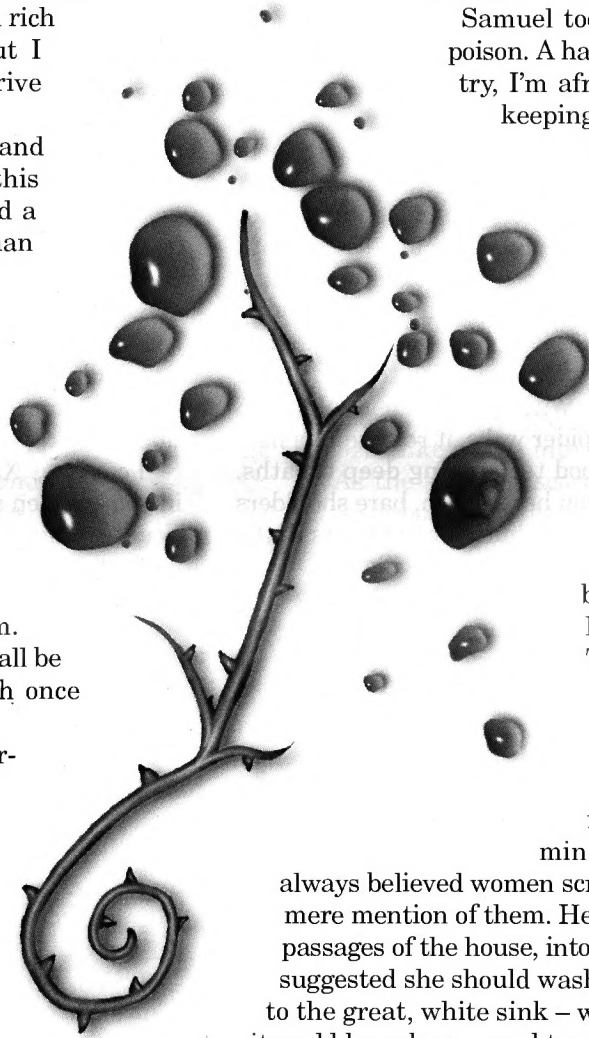
Samuel smiled at her. What an admirable quality in a woman, this fearlessness where vermin were concerned. He'd

always believed women screamed and fainted at the mere mention of them. He led her through the dark passages of the house, into the old kitchen, where he suggested she should wash her hands. Xanthe went to the great, white sink – which was not as white as it could have been – and turned on the cold water tap. "Poison is dangerous," she said. "We might have children one day, Samuel. Why haven't you got a brace of good cats to deal with the problem?"

Samuel did not wish to mention that the poisons growing in his garden were lethal to dogs and cats, while at the same time oddly attractive to them. The thought of children made him go momentarily cold. He imagined little hands reaching for the tempting, deadly fruits. He laughed too heartily and made a feeble joke that animals did not like him.

"Do they not?" Xanthe said coolly, looking for something on which to wipe her wet hands, and finally opting for the front of her dress.

As the sun sank, they went into the dark, dusty dining-room and there consumed the modest repast that Hesta



had left for them; cold meats, cheese and thick, heavy bread. Samuel had found a bottle of wine that had not gone off, but it was thick and red – nothing like the light, acid wines he had enjoyed with Xanthe in Mewt. Afterwards, Samuel showed Xanthe around the more habitable areas of the house, finally leading her to his bedroom. Xanthe's nose wrinkled fastidiously, but she seemed relieved to discover that at least the sheets were crisp and clean. Spiders bred in the dusty, faded folds of velvet drapes around the bed, and the windows were opaque with grey-green grime. Samuel had made a small effort at decorating the room, however, and had filled a number of huge, antique vases with garden flowers – not the children of his ladies, but some lesser blooms left over from the days when his mother had tended the estate.

Xanthe sat on the bed and said, "I may have to make changes here, Samuel." She leaned back on stiff arms and looked around herself. "You've had dire need of a homely touch, it seems."

"You may do what you like to the house," he replied.

Xanthe nodded and silently smiled. Standing, and fixing him with her slanting eyes, she peeled away her dress. Samuel went to her, eager to touch her smooth skin once more, to breathe in her intoxicating scent. Pulling away from him, she walked, naked, to the window and wiped the glass. The moon was rising above the trees, sailing high. Xanthe struggled to open one of the windows and, at last, with a scraping creak and a fall of dead insects and spider webs, it released its hold on its frame. Xanthe stood tall, taking deep breaths. Samuel put his hands upon her smooth, bare shoulders and kissed the cool flesh. She buried her fingers in the thick velvet drapes and sighed like the night.

Below them, in the pale moonlight, the flowers had turned their heads towards the ground. But for the rustling of rats in the grass, the gardens were silent.

The following morning after breakfast, Samuel took his new bride into the garden behind the house. He had decided there was no point in delaying a certain crucial introduction, although his heart beat fast.

Xanthe stepped down the shallow steps that led to the lawn and shaded her eyes. "It is so bright out here after being inside. The house needs light, Samuel."

Samuel took her elbow in a firm yet gentle grip and ushered her over the grass to the first walled garden. Herbs grew here, surrounded by granite pathways. In the centre, was an ancient grey sundial, almost like an altar. Beyond the herb garden, steps led down into a shaded avenue of stately poplars, with lawns to either side, bordered by mature roses of dark red and startling white. Behind them, lush green ivy tumbled over crumbling walls.

Xanthe examined her surroundings with apparent pleasure, complimenting Samuel on the variety of the plants and the secluded mystery of the linked gardens. "Is that water I hear?" she asked. "Oh, Samuel, do you have a water garden?"

Breaking away from him, she ran down a pathway, her swift body dappled by sunlight. Samuel was forced to run to keep up with her, slightly annoyed by her wilfulness.

He found her by the fountain, where a voluptuous stone mermaid held up her hands to release a stream of cold, clear water. The pond was greened with the leath-

ery saucers of water-lilies. It was surrounded by a circular path, around which grew a tall juniper hedge. Samuel once again slipped a hand beneath Xanthe's elbow. His voice was hushed. "This way." He put a finger to his lips.

Xanthe frowned quizzically, but did not speak. She went compliantly into the yew walk that led to the court of the queen. Samuel saw her studying the strange plants that grew in the gloom, some with long, white heads like trumpets and others with purple spikes. Later, he would regale her with their secret histories. Then, the narrow opening in the hedge was ahead, and he allowed his new bride to go before him.

Night's Damozel reared imperially in her green bower. Xanthe paused at the entrance to this hidden garden, and Samuel heard her draw in her breath. She seemed almost shocked. He hurried past her, smiled encouragingly and urged her forward. "Come, come, this is who I've been waiting to show you."

Xanthe's eyes were wide; it made her look peculiarly sinister. "It is a creature of enchantment," she breathed, and then flicked him a narrower glance. "Where did you get it?"

"A corner of the world," Samuel whispered, "but hush. Stand before her, but not too close. Her pollen is toxic."

So the new bride was introduced to the queen. Their beauty seemed to complement each other; both so tall and still. Samuel could not detect any sense of rivalry or pique in the Damozel, but perhaps the presence of another human being stifled his communication with the flower.

"I can see," Xanthe said softly, "that all other flowers in your garden are but a screen for this priceless bloom. You keep her secret, of course." She nodded gently to herself. "But that is only right."

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say..."

"No!" Xanthe interrupted. "I can see the truth of it. Thank you for bringing me here."

Samuel felt oddly uneasy. He wasn't sure what reaction he'd expected from Xanthe, but it wasn't this.

As they walked back to the house, Xanthe was silent. Samuel asked her what she thought of his garden.

"It is a wonderland," she said. "Your haven of myth and dream." A certain gleam in her eyes made Samuel wonder whether she'd divined the nature of his relationship with some of the more narcotic plants. He did not like her thinking that. She seemed to be laughing at him.

"It is my hobby," he said stiffly. "I have spent a lot of time on it."

She smiled. "Oh yes, I can see that. I have some small knowledge myself, for my father is something of a horticulturist."

"Really." This was news to Samuel.

"Indeed. I think I can say that although you cultivate many rare species, there is only one of true value – your maiden of the night. The others may be seen commonly in many Mewtish gardens."

"Is that so?" Samuel felt nettled, annoyed that someone, who herself had confessed to having "small knowledge" would dare to comment on the value of his collection. It would take some getting used to – living with someone else, who was full of opinions of their own. Still, she was indeed beautiful, and he was gratified she shared his respect for the Damozel. He bent down to pluck a delicate blue flower, a species of orchid. "This reminds me of you. It is named Velenia, after a

bewitching woman. This flower is yours, my love."

Xanthe took the bloom and stared at it bemusedly. "It has thorns, tiny thorns," she said, twirling it in her fingers. By the time they reached the sundial, her fingers had begun to itch and sting. She dropped the flower on the lawn.

At mid-day, Hesta arrived for work, and disappeared with Xanthe into the kitchens. Samuel felt strongly that he was excluded from their domain, but was relieved that Hesta seemed not to resent his new wife. Later, he questioned Xanthe on how Hesta had behaved. "We will have an understanding," Xanthe replied. "She is a strong-willed woman, who expected trouble, I think, but I trust she is as pleased with me as I am with her."

This answer seemed ambiguous, but it was clear Xanthe did not intend to expand upon it. Samuel, a stranger to the ways of women, reluctantly accepted that it was beyond his comprehension.

On the morning of the second day, Samuel said to Xanthe, "You have brought the sun from Mewt with you." By ten o'clock, the gardens had begun to simmer in the heat.

"Aah, this is the weather I like," sighed Xanthe, padding on bare feet out from the house to the lawn.

Samuel glanced at the sky. A heatwave, or worse, a drought, would mean a lot of work for him in the garden. All the plants would need to be kept watered. He felt exhausted. Tonight, he must try to get more sleep.

Xanthe on the other hand seemed full of energy. She made her way to the sundial garden and there composed herself on the ancient grey flagstones, fanned by the scent of baking herbs. At noon, Hesta stamped out from the house, carrying a tray of refreshment. Samuel, working on a flowerbed nearby, saw her disappear into the herb garden. She did not come out for some time. It was strange how Xanthe seemed to have cultivated a friendship with the dour Hesta so quickly. They seemed unlikely companions.

As the weeks passed, this friendship developed. Xanthe apparently encouraged Hesta into cleaning some of the rooms, because the house became a lighter, airier place that smelled of scent and polish. Xanthe seemed to respect that Samuel needed time alone with his ladies, for she rarely went into the garden after sundown, having spent most of day sunning herself by the sundial. She really was quite a lazy creature, but her presence inspired Hesta to work hard, despite the uncomfortable heat, which seemed now to have invaded even the shadiest corner of the house.

Samuel was concerned by the persistent lack of rain; the more delicate of his plants were already begin to suffer the effects. Fortunately the shady bower of Night's Damozel seemed to suffer the least effects, and it here where Samuel concentrated his greatest efforts at keeping the soil moist. He always watered the Damozel in the sultry evenings, and after his task was complete, disrobed himself, confident he would not be disturbed. Then he would lie down on the drenched leaves of the Damozel, while a mist of dream dust shimmered down from her open hearts. Sometimes, in his intoxicated state, Samuel could almost believe that the Damozel was indeed a female of flesh and blood. A spirit lived within her, who manifested into his dreams as a soft-fingered lover. It was as if he had two wives; one of the sun, and one of darkness. The night was so serene and comfortable, whereas the scorching day made him irritable and anxious.

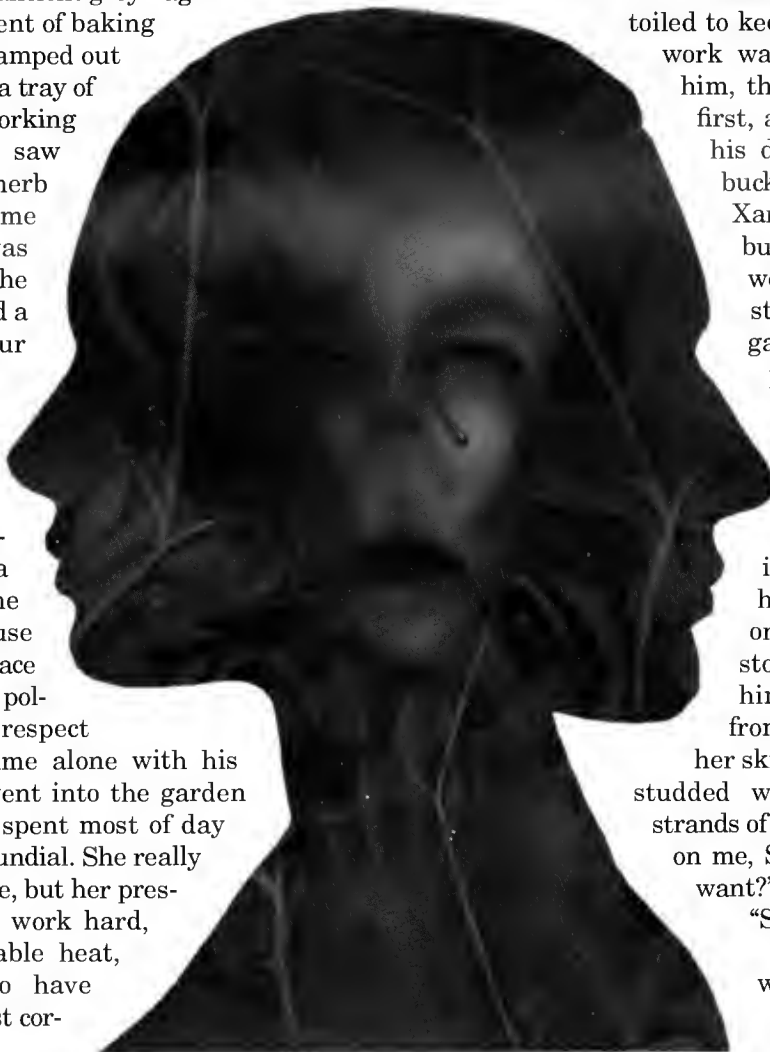
In these tranquil moments, Samuel found uncomfortable thoughts forming in his head. Had he made a mistake in bringing Xanthe here? She was lovely, but a foreigner, and despite their weeks of passion in Mewt had very little else in common. She was here now, installed. He would have to live with her forever. Yet she was compliant, soft-footed and unobtrusive. The only changes she had made to his life had to be seen as positive. Why did these doubts come to plague him? All the while, a soft drift of pollen fell from the blooms of the Damozel, like words into his ears.

As the summer scorched the lawns, Xanthe basked in the herb garden, while Samuel toiled to keep his ladies alive. The work was really too much for him, the garden too large. At first, as he struggled around his domain carrying heavy buckets of water, he thought Xanthe might offer to help, but when no suggestions were forthcoming, he stomped over to the herb garden, intent on complaining. Wasn't a wife supposed to assist her husband in all his duties? He found her lolling prostrate in the sun, soaking up its heat like a reptile. At his approach, she rolled onto her back on the flagstones and squinted up at him. Her dress had fallen from her shoulders, where her skin was dry as paper and studded with tiny pebbles and strands of moss. "You are sweating on me, Samuel. What is it you want?"

"Some help."

She frowned. "To do what?"

He gestured angrily. "My garden is dying and



you just lie here all day, every day. Help me carry the water."

Xanthe laughed and raised herself onto her elbows. "You want *me* to help? What on earth for? Get a boy from the town, or one of the farms. You surely can't expect *me* to lug carriers of water about."

"You know I don't want strangers here."

Xanthe shrugged. "You are a fool. Keep your dark lady secret, by all means, but there's no reason why some local boys shouldn't attend to the rest of the place." She smiled. "Samuel, I am not a big, strong man and that's what you need for this. See sense."

"What about Hesta? Get her to help me."

Xanthe shook her head mildly. "No, the garden is not Hesta's province. She has too much to do about the house."

"I noticed!" Hesta's hours had increased over the weeks, as had her wages – at Xanthe's insistence. It was as if the women were somehow building a new house around him that no longer belonged to him.

"Are you complaining that I have turned your ruin of a house into a home?" Xanthe said, her voice cool.

"No, no..." Samuel wanted to abandon the conversation. He backed away from his wife until the hedges hid her from view. Pausing beyond them, he heard her sigh, then imagined she just settled herself back to drowsing, dismissing him from her mind.

Disgruntled, Samuel sought the sanctuary of Night's Damozel's bower. He couldn't help unburdening himself of sour thoughts about his wife. "Sometimes, the mere sight of her makes me angry," he confessed. "Yet she is exquisite – submissive and calm. What she said about hiring boys from the village was right, of course, and yet..." He shook his head. "There is something wrong. Something." The queen of his garden listened patiently. She alone seemed unaffected by the heat. Around her, her maidens lay swooning on the soil.

Later, when he returned to the house, Xanthe was there with her serpent smile and cool, welcoming hands. "Samuel, we must not argue about petty things. Of course, I shall ask Hesta to give you an hour of her time every day. I'm sure she won't mind." She bathed his brow and kissed his fingertips. She was his wife, his beauty. He felt ashamed.

Now, every day, Hesta, apparently without grudge, tramped back and forth from the kitchen to the gardens with water. She was a strong, steady worker, but even her help was not enough to slake the thirst of the parched soil.

"The garden is dying," Samuel told Xanthe in anguish. "I am helpless."

"There is more to life than gardens," Xanthe said. "And anyway, what is lost can be regained. Your precious Damozel won't wither. I know you make sure of that."

Samuel did not like her tone. She often seemed to make innuendoes about his relationship with the Damozel, but not enough for Samuel to challenge her outright. He wondered whether in some way, Xanthe actually enjoyed watching him panic as his ladies succumbed to the drought. Perhaps she was jealous.

Every day, Samuel examined the rat-traps he kept in corners of the house to augment the poison trays. For the past few weeks, he'd been surprised to find all the traps empty, although on one occasion he'd thought he detected a smear of blood, some hairs. It was strange there were no kills. Had the vermin become wise to his precautions,

or was the continuing hot weather responsible?

He mentioned it to Xanthe, who replied, "Are you complaining? I'd have thought you'd be glad to see the back of them."

Again, that sharp tone, an implied criticism. "But they are not gone completely," Samuel said, "I hear them walking beneath the floor-boards at night. Don't you?"

Xanthe shrugged. "I hear many strange things. This is an old house. What do you expect?"

Anger burned through him. He wanted to strike her. Relations between them were becoming more frequently tinged with what Samuel perceived as sniping comments, yet at the same time, he found his desire for Xanthe increased. His lovemaking became urgent and unsophisticated although Xanthe remained unruffled by his lust. Samuel always felt drained and exhausted afterwards, usually falling into a deep sleep within minutes, while he suspected that Xanthe remained awake for hours. More often than not, he would wake in the morning with a pounding headache, as drained and groggy as if he had hardly slept. The heat was oppressive; he felt weak and sickly.

As the weeks of summer rolled on, it seemed that Xanthe's initial interest in renovating the family pile had been short-lived. Hesta, no longer confined to scrubbing away the past in the house, was now Xanthe's constant handmaiden, sitting beside her in the herb garden, shelling peas for dinner, or skinning rabbits. Xanthe's sole occupation was to lie in the sun, and when she entered the house at night, she seemed to burn with her own light. She and Hesta murmured together. Samuel could hear their soft tones in every corner of the garden, and occasionally a husky laugh. Hesta brought gifts for Xanthe from the farm, some of which were distinctly strange: a dish of goat's milk, what appeared to be a withered umbilical cord, some dried poppy heads, a dead bird. Samuel supposed this was some traditional thing that once his mother must have enjoyed with the local women. One day, in the kitchen, he said, "She seems to think you are a cat." He gestured at the milk Hesta had left out in a dish on the table.

"No," said Xanthe emphatically, "she does not. The milk is for my hands and arms." She began to rub it into her dry skin.

"But the other things..." He wrinkled his nose in distaste.

Xanthe examined him blandly. "Alkanet root, poppy seeds, feathers? They are ingredients for a herbal concoction. I have trouble with my skin."

Samuel shook his head. Xanthe increasingly unnerved him. She was attentive in their shared bed, but during the day seemed distant and indifferent. Also, Samuel noticed that she rarely seemed to drink. It was unnatural. As he watched her dipping her pointed fingers in the milk, he had to suppress a shudder. It was more than being unnerved; he felt a wave of revulsion.

Xanthe looked at him, alert, as if his mind was her garden in which to walk. She smiled at him, perhaps with a hint of cynicism. He felt dizzy; the heat was getting to him. There was so much to do, yet he had little energy. Xanthe had come into his domain and had made it hers. She had brought searing equatorial heat with her, and both he and his garden were withering in

it. She will be the death of me, he thought.

That evening, Samuel wearily carried water to the Night's Damsel's bower. Her blooms reared into the darkness, releasing a drizzle of shimmering pollen. He held out his hands to it, let it run over the backs of his hands. Xanthe left dust wherever she lay. In the mornings, their bed was full of it, a pollen of her own, faintly soapy against his fingers. Groaning, he threw himself into the lap of the Damsel's leaves. "Help me," he said. "I am invaded!"

The Damsel could not speak. She only gave him visions. As the pollen settled over him, seeped down into his lungs and melted through the pores of his skin, he saw Xanthe stealing through the house at noon, when all was still and drenched in heat. He saw her stoop over the rat traps and take the soft corpses from them. He saw her eat. In his stupor, his stomach roiled. She had what she wanted: this house, these gardens. She would turn them into a barren desert where her unnatural hunger for heat could be indulged. She was a witch who influenced the weather, killing all that he held dear. Hesta was her creature now; bewitched and pliant. What a fool he had been.

The blooms above him looked like fairy faces. He fancied he could almost see thin lips mouthing silent words. "Listen, my beloved, listen..."

Later, Samuel crept in from the garden, and went to the room where his wife lay slumbering. He stared at her for a few moments, noticing the faintly luminous sparkle on her skin, which might be an effect of the oils she used. He dreaded the powdery touch of her flesh against his own, yet when he slid beneath the covers beside her still form, he could do nothing but take her in his arms, inhale her strong, musky scent. She had that power over him. He resented it. *Do not think. Act now or it will be too late.* Carefully, he rolled her onto her back. She made a small sound, but did not wake. Her lips were slightly parted.

Samuel dribbled a shining stream of motes down into Xanthe's mouth. The Damsel's pollen could be rubbed into the skin, inhaled or ingested, the latter being the most effective method. The gate of dreams or the portal of death: only long acquaintance with the lady made that distinction. A dust glistened faintly at the corners of Xanthe's lips; Samuel covered them with his own, her body with his.

The funeral cortège milled around the front of the house. There was Sythia, imported from her summer home of Mewt, holding a scrap of black lace to her eyes. She was surrounded by others of her tribe, profligates, counts and divas, debutantes, artists and concubines.

The majority of them had been summering at Sythia's estate, and once the news of the death had arrived by swift courier, the group had flocked to accept the invitation to the funeral. They were a mass of tall, nodding feathers and rustling costumes of black silk. Jetty horses stamped and snorted before the hearse, tossing their girlish manes, their hooves polished to a sheen. The day should have been overcast and grey, the trees weeping tears of rain. Clouds should have occluded the sun. The brightness and heat of late summer seemed an affront to the occasion, and several ladies were already feeling weak in their tight stays.

Sythia spotted a tall figure emerging from the shadows of the hall and swept up the worn front steps. "Oh, but I shall ride with you in the foremost carriage. What a distressing time, for you, dear heart. How terrible. How cruel."

Xanthe paused to pull on a skin-tight pair of black gloves. She inclined her head coolly. "I shall be grateful for your company, Sythia." Together, the women descended the steps, and the mourners drew apart to give them passage.

On the boat over, one of Sythia's friends had divulged an alarming revelation. Although information concerning Xanthe was scant in Mewt, the informant had discovered that Samuel's death occasioned the fourth time Xanthe

had been widowed. "It seems, my dear," the confidant had said dryly, "that the lady has a distressing propensity for losing husbands."

"Sad coincidences," Sythia said coldly, for she admired Xanthe greatly.

"Perhaps so," the companion said, "but this is certainly the shortest marriage of her history. The other three husbands at least survived the wedding for several years."

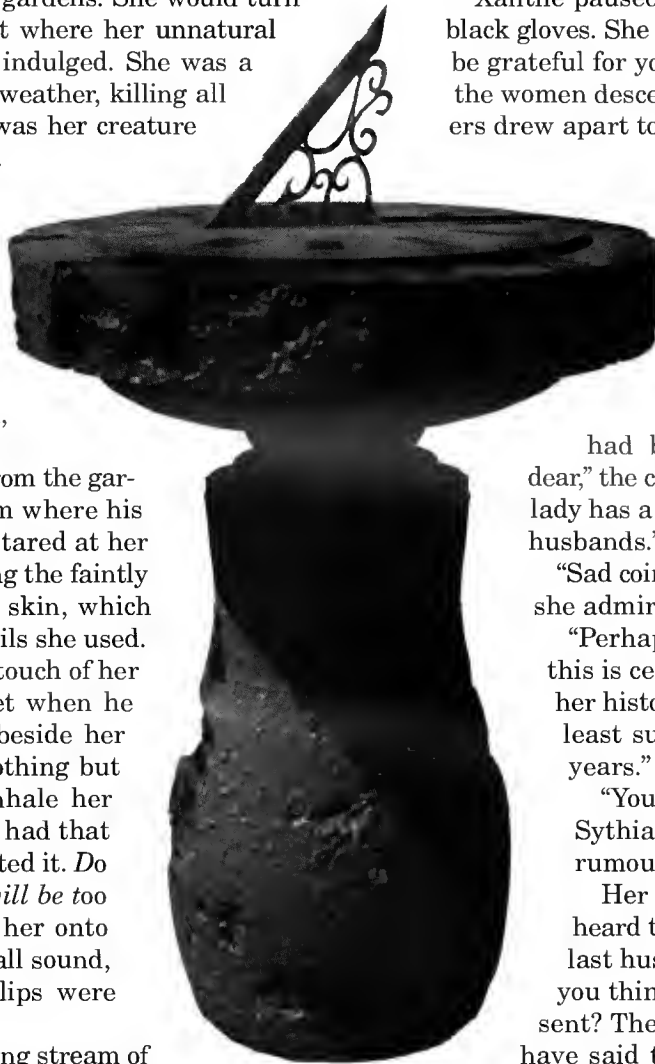
"You should not say such things," Sythia retorted. "That is how ugly rumours start."

Her friend raised an eyebrow. "But I heard this from the second cousin of her last husband, who was Cossic. What do you think the talk of the coast is at present? There were rumours already. Some have said that Samuel had the spectre of death at his shoulder even as he spoke his marriage vows."

"I won't countenance this nonsense," Sythia said. "Xanthe is a lovely woman. She comes from a rich family, and lacks for nothing."

Now, as she climbed into the sombre carriage, with Xanthe so self-possessed beside her, suspicions flitted across Sythia's mind. The widow seemed very little marked by grief. Her eyes were clear, her face set in its usual enigmatic expression. "It was very thoughtful of you to wait so long for the interment, my dear," Sythia said. "This heat..."

Xanthe flicked her a glance. "Poor Samuel has no



family. It was the least I could do to gather his friends for this occasion."

"But three weeks..."

"The coffin is sealed," Xanthe said. "And we have stored him in the cellars, which are cool."

Sythia shuddered. The frank details seemed indelicate. "Of course, we came as soon as we could."

Xanthe patted Sythia's hand. "I know. Please don't trouble yourself."

Sythia paused, then said, "The contents of your message were scant. How exactly did Samuel die?"

Xanthe closed her eyes for a moment, the first signal Sythia had seen that the widow suffered any twinge of emotion. "This may be distressing for you to hear," she said, "but the truth is, Samuel has long been addicted to intoxicants extracted from certain exotic plants he grew at the estate. I'm afraid he poisoned himself unwittingly." She seemed to sense her companion's troubled thoughts and fixed her with a guileless stare. "The family doctor from the town has identified the plant responsible, and we made upsetting discoveries in my husband's study – equipment to distill the essence of the plant, and so on."

"Oh," said Sythia inadequately.

Xanthe sighed. "I have little luck where husbands are concerned, it seems."

"You poor creature," Sythia murmured, but still her heart beat fast.

At the graveside, while the mourners sweated uncomfortably in their ornate costumes, Xanthe stood cool and tall, staring down into the gaping earth. She seemed at least melancholy.

"What will you do now?" Sythia asked her as they returned to the house. "Come home to Mewt?"

"No," Xanthe answered. "I shall remain here for a while at least."

"Alone?"

Xanthe smiled. "Yes. Alone."

In the humid evening, Hesta reverently sponged Xanthe's skin with milk. The moon was rising behind the trees and the gardens lay in silence. There were no rats out there, nor in the house; no small creatures at all. All the guests had gone.

Xanthe rose from her bath and Hesta wrapped her in a towel. "I will never marry outside my own kind again," Xanthe said.

Hesta made a small, comforting sound. "It was not your fault, my lady."

Xanthe shook her head. "This time... this time, it seemed so right. He accepted me as what I am, did not question my behaviour." Her voice was low and uninflected, her gaze steady. She glanced down at Hesta. "But what I am has followed me from Mewt. It was waiting here, but twisted." She sighed and touched her belly. "It is time now for me to settle this matter."

Hesta dropped a small curtsy. "I will await you, ma'am, in the kitchens."

Xanthe smiled. "I will not be long." She clad herself in a long sheath of fabric, the colour of the moon, opalescent and oily. She glided through the house and out through the long back windows, down across the yellow lawns, past the sundial, the mermaid fountain, deeper, deeper into the garden to the court of the queen.

In the outer courts the ladies of venom lay desiccated in their beds, petals strewn around them like papery jewels. Xanthe paid them no attention.

The queen, Night's Damozel, still reigned in her bower, despite the fact that Xanthe had denied her water for three weeks. Her leaves had withered and the tall stalks of her flowers were wrinkled like the skin of a crone. The purple flowers were splayed open, like dying tulips, revealing black and golden hearts. Xanthe crept through the yews on silent, naked feet and stood before her.

"Greetings," she said. "We have commerce to conduct, you and I."

A single, damaged petal fell from one of the flowers, and the stillness of the night was absolute. Xanthe began to circle the central bower. "Your lover is dead, and your minions have either perished or retreated into a death-like sleep. How much longer will you stand, dark lady? I admire the way you cling to life, even though half your roots are now nothing more than lifeless twigs."

Night's Damozel seemed to shudder in the moonlight and another petal fell.

"Come forth," Xanthe hissed, her eyes like slits, her elegant hands clenched into fists at her sides. Her narrow body swayed before the Damozel, and her will pulsed out of her like steam.

Again the plant convulsed.

"Do you hear me?" Xanthe said. "I order you to come forth. If you savour life, then obey me. If not, I shall trample your crippled body into the earth. I am not afraid of you, dark Damozel, for my poisons are greater than yours."

The image of the plant seemed to ripple, and a stream of vapour exuded from the earth. It coiled at ground level, and then puffed upwards, resolving at last into an indistinct, female figure.

"But you must show me more," Xanthe said. "I do not believe this wisp, this ghost!"

The emanation gradually became more solid, until it was clear that a strange woman stood upon the withered leaves of the Damozel. Her skin was pale with purple shadows. Her heart-shaped face was alien, horrifying, yet peculiarly alluring. She had barely a nose to speak of and her eyes were feathered slits.

Xanthe shook her head. "He never had the power to conjure you, did he," she murmured, "but then he knew so little of what he had."

The Damozel fell to hands and knees upon the soil, her pale downy hair falling over her face. She looked starved, nearly dead.

"You know I could have come before," Xanthe said, "and perhaps you were waiting for me. If I had succumbed, would Samuel still be alive?" She put her head on one side to study the spirit of the flower. "I could destroy you now," she said. "and should. Poor Samuel. He sought to kill me with your pollen, and woke in me the instinct to survive. What could I do but strike? I had no choice, for my nature overcame me. Didn't you think of that? I found him dead upon me. You are a jealous mistress, lady, but I know your measure."

The spirit of the Damozel lifted her head. Her eyes wept an indigo steam.

Xanthe extended one slim foot until it nearly touched the Damozel's fragile, splayed fingers. "I have loved and

lost too many times, but in Samuel found peace. In his innocence and inexperience, he lacked the brutal qualities of men who awake the beast within me. Noxious flower, you have destroyed my haven, for now I am alone again!"

The Damsel's fingers flexed in the dry soil.

Xanthe folded her arms. "In my land, you are known by a different name, Ophidia. You are the serpent flower. They say in Mewt that the serpents who doze among your leaves leave you the gift of their poison. It is said that this is how you able to concoct your seductive venoms." Xanthe laughed coldly. "We know better, don't we?"

The spirit raised its head and opened its mouth, the interior of which was black. No sound came out.

"Oh, you are parched, of course," Xanthe said. "Do you choose death or life, dark lady? You see, I am merciful. I give you that choice." She squatted down before the spirit. "As I know your kind, Ophidia, you must know mine. We have a long history between us. I walk the land, but you cannot. You are the cauldron of venom, and I am its channel. Together we become greater than our separate parts. You have killed my love, and made me all that I sought to forget. So, we must revive the ancient contract. Refuse me, and you die."

The Damsel's eyes were black holes in her pale countenance, without expression. Then, with painful slowness, she attempted to crawl to Xanthe across the crumbling soil.

Xanthe smiled to herself and stood up, retreating a few steps. She gestured with both arms. "Come, come to me, serpent flower. Get to your feet."

Stumbling, the Damsel lifted her body erect. It seemed she was unused to it, for her limbs moved awkwardly. There was a hunger in her posture, in the curve of her spine.

Xanthe put her hands upon the mushy flesh of the Damsel's arms and lifted her as if she were a child. Xanthe opened her mouth wide and lifted her tongue. In the moonlight, two dark glands that leaked an inky liquid extended over her lower teeth. Even before the Damsel's lips met her own, a spray of venom jetted out of her mouth, smelling of burned feathers. "I know you," Xanthe hissed. "Take my bane."

The house was a cool now, a shadowy sanctuary from the sun. The gardens below simmered and seethed in the last of summer's heat; the grass now parched and crisp, the flowers brown and withered. Xanthe looked out upon the garden from her bedroom window as Hesta busied herself stripping the sheets from the bed. Summer was breaking now. It would not be long before the cold came creeping across the land, bringing with it the desire for sleep.

"My lady," Hesta said.

Xanthe turned and found the woman holding out the folds of white bedsheet to her. They were filled with a fibrous dust. "Yes, it is time." She stroked her swollen belly, where the heart of a daughter beat and grew. Xanthe's kind rarely had sons. She took some of the dust in her fingers, then let it trickle away. Her skin itched, and now her face looked grey and tired.

"It has been a long summer," Xanthe said. "I will be glad to cast it away."

She removed her dress and went naked through the house, down long stairs, through the drawing-room and out into the sunlight, moving stiffly. The desiccated lawn crunched beneath her feet. In the herb-garden, the soles of her feet burned against the flagstones, yet her face registered no pain. Deeper now, into the court of the queen. The bower thrived in a tropical lushness, and a single flower remained in the midst of the Damsel's leaves. Here, Xanthe lay down upon the soil. She closed her eyes and arched her back, her brow wrinkled in a frown. She touched her throat, and then pressed one fingernail, the colour of dried blood, against her flesh. The skin parted with a soft popping sound. Slowly, she drew the nail down her body, opening herself up like a flower. Pollen drifted down from the Damsel; the last of it. No blood beaded along the deep scratch in Xanthe's flesh. The skin simply lifted away, like old paper, crumbling with age. Beneath it lay clean, virgin skin already coloured a deep honey gold, glistening as if kneaded with rich oils. Softly, the last petals of the Damsel fell down upon Xanthe's body and veiled her eyes.

Storm Constantine & Eloise Coquio co-edit the small-press-magazine *Visionary Tongue*, from Stafford. Storm is the author of many novels and stories – including the *Interzone* pieces "Priest of Hands" (issue 58), "Built on Blood" (issue 64), "The Green Calling" (issue 73) and "The Rust Islands" (issue 117). Eloise has had a couple of stories published in small magazines and is currently collaborating with Storm on a non-fiction book about the feline deities of Ancient Egypt.

Lifetime Subscriptions

If you can afford to do so, why not consider supporting this magazine by taking out a very long-term subscription?

We define a lifetime sub as one which lasts either the lifetime of the subscriber or the lifetime of the magazine.

Lifetime subscriptions to *Interzone* cost £320 (UK), £380 (overseas), \$600 (U.S. accelerated surface mail). Please make your cheque payable to "Interzone" and send it to our main editorial address, shown on page 3.

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

The second Discworld Convention (September) was an interesting experience for people like me whom guest of honour Terry Pratchett described as “gnarled old con hands.” The new sub-fandom of Discworld still has an almost full charge of the sense of wonder that’s rather worn off in 61 years of traditional sf conventions. I and equally gnarled SF Foundation man Andy Sawyer felt quite guilty on realizing we were the only people in the bar all one afternoon. Everyone else was dutifully attending the programme...

THE BUMPER FUN GRIMOIRE

Michael Bishop reveals the shocking truth behind another pseudonym: “Philip Lawson,” author of the mystery novel *Would It Kill You To Smile?* (Longstreet Press, 1998) is none other than “Paul Di Filippo (*The Steampunk Trilogy*, *Fractal Paisleys*, *Ribofunk*, *Ciphers*, *Lost Pages*, etc.) and me (*Brittle Innings*, *Ulysses*, *War & Peace*, *Madame Bovary*, etc.).”

John Clute’s tale of woe and lost sf trophies last issue brought a noble response from Los Angeles fans, who are arranging a replacement LAcon 3 (1996 Worldcon) Hugo. There are spares, since some of that year’s Retro Hugos for 50-year-old work couldn’t be presented. A side effect is that George Orwell’s Retro Hugo for *Animal Farm* came to light and may soon find its logical home: the Orwell archive in the library of University College, London.

Neil Gaiman made his TV debut this year, in what our Fortean correspondent Joe McNally describes as “some British-produced sub-manga nonsense named *Archangel: Thunderbird* in which Mr G. provides the voice for a rubbish plasticine demon...” Quoth Neil, wistfully: “I’m sure I’d be a shoo-in for the Best Heavily Electronically Treated Plasticine Demon Voice BAFTA award, if only there was one.”

Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998), Japan’s most famous film director, died on 6 Sept aged 88. His influential

movies included *Rashomon* (1950), *The Seven Samurai* (1954), *Throne of Blood* (1957), *Yojimbo* (1961), and *Kagemusha aka Shadow Warrior* (1980).

Terry Pratchett stripped to the waist is a terrifyingly hirsute sight: alarming photographs were taken and furtive orangutan jokes made. All this was because Liverpool’s Adelphi Hotel greeted the Discworld convention with a broken pool thermostat, leading to hot-bath temperatures and a runaway greenhouse effect: TP had to wrench off his shirt when he overheated during six hours of autograph sessions. The event raised £6000 for Macmillan Cancer Relief and the Orangutan Foundation. Discworld’s creator waxed emotional at the closing ceremony: “It’s been such a pleasure to see your little faces... it makes all the money worth while...”

Carl Sagan commented from beyond the grave on the 1998 Dramatic Presentation Hugo winner: “The book was better than the movie. There was more in it.” (*Contact*, 1985)

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Legal High Jinks in Canada. That multi-million dollar Robert Sawyer/Allan Weiss literary lawsuit (see last column) rages on. One benefit barbecue party organized for the widely supported Sawyer defence fund raised some \$2,000. The exciting follow-up rumour – that Weiss was maddened into extending his lawsuit and suing the *Toronto Star* merely for reporting on the fund-raising party – is apparently quite untrue...

British Fantasy Awards. Novel (August Derleth Award): Chaz Brenchley, *Light Errant*. Anthology/Collection: *Dark Terrors 3* ed Stephen Jones & David Sutton. Short: Christopher Fowler, “Wage-slaves.” Artist: Jim Burns. Small Press: *Interzone*. Special (Karl Edward Wagner Award): D. F. Lewis. Committee Award: Ken Bulmer, for services to the British Fantasy Society – he was its first president.

Real-World News. At a world population conference in Beijing, university researcher Philip Adongo from Ghana explained that his sociological conclusion (small families work better in modern society) was based partly on interviews with the dead. He’d used soothsayers to poll African village ancestors on the family-size question: “If I only heard from the living, I wouldn’t get a very good balance. [...] This study has been the first to be conducted of respondents who are deceased.” Next issue, we interview John W. Campbell.

Censored! Artist Tony DiTerlizzi’s name has been purged from the title and copyright pages of Greg Bear’s *Dinosaur Summer* (UK Harper-Collins pb)... and all his jolly internal illustrations have gone too, even

the many b/w drawings which could easily have been reproduced. Shame.

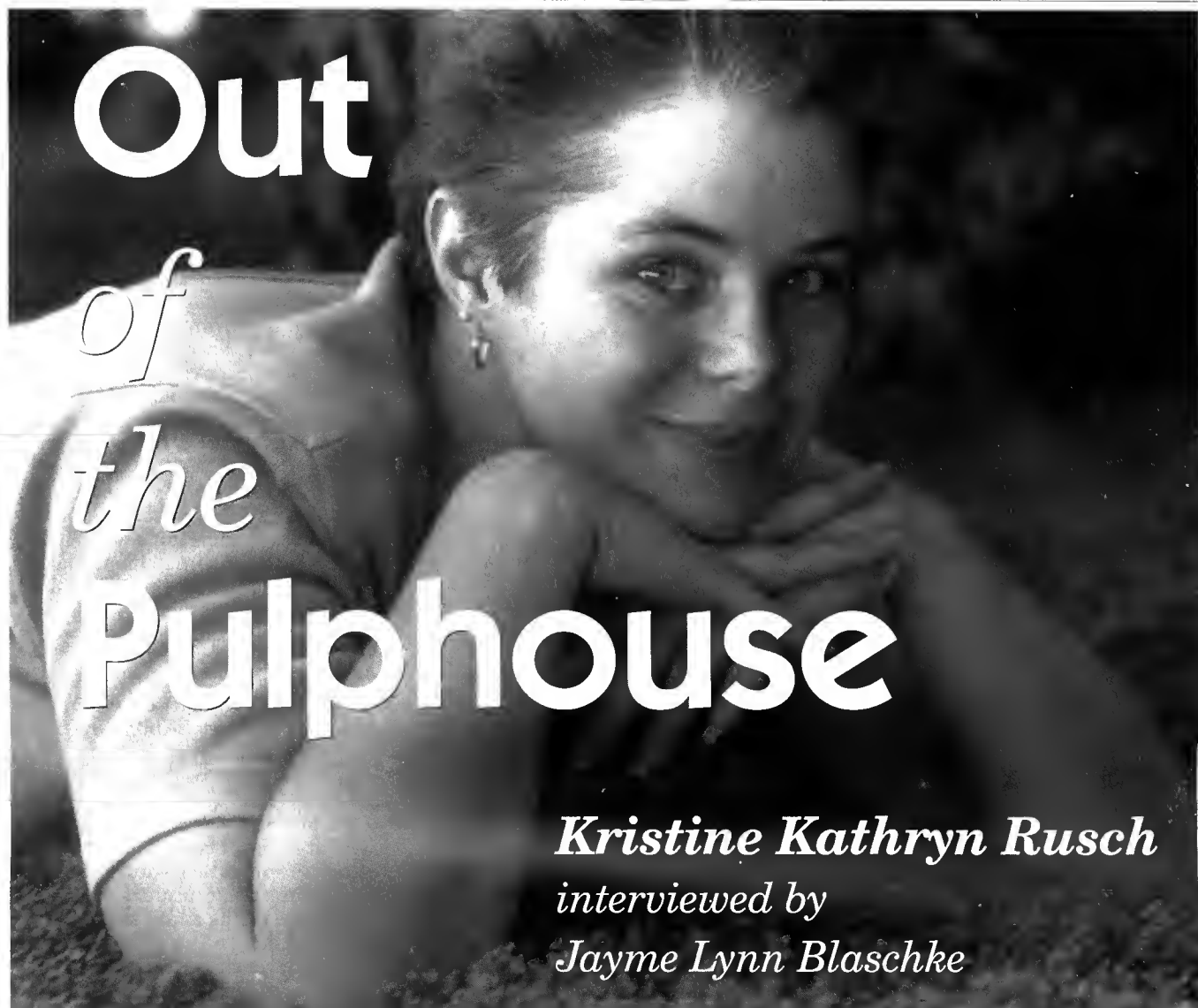
Bonny Banks. An on-line book search disclosed: *Classic Glamour Photography* by Iain M. Banks. (1989, Amphoto; ISBN: 0817436723). Our correspondent asks, “Is there no end to the man’s talents?”

Small Press. *The Arts of Falconrie & Hawking: A Beginners Guide* by “Hodgesaargh,” with distressed fonts and spelling, mingles real and Discworld lore. Proceeds to Discworld convention charities. A6, 44pp+covers, £3.50 to Dave Hodges, 68 Gotch Rd, Barton Seagrave, Kettering, NN15 6UQ. **Steve Sneyd** offers more historical-poetic booklets: *Challenge* (£2.75) is a Lilith Lorraine anthology, *Kin to the Far Beyond* (£1.70) traces US sf fanzine poetry 70s-90s, and *Entropies & Alignments* (£1.45) covers 60s UK fanzines (unearting much early Brian Stableford poetry). All post free: 4 Nowell Place, Almondsbury, Huddersfield, HD5 8PB.

Shameless Self-Promotion. *Simon R. Green* makes my flesh creep: “Well, it’s official; you’re in *Deathstalker Destiny*. You are a named character, you have dialogue, and you die a horrible death. Much like everyone else in the *Deathstalker* series, really...”... **David L. Stone**, world-famous *Interzone* reviewer, brags that he “appeared in full colour on the front page of a Kent newspaper accompanied by the heading ‘Posh Spice Loves Me’.” Seemingly this *Dune* character adored DLS’s story in the small-press magazine *Xenos* so much that she sent a fan letter.

Those Fantasy Encyclopedia Corrigenda can be consulted on the web at <http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Misc/>...

Thog’s Masterclass. “With gruesome relish, Lena kept topping herself during the long hike east from the Rimmer Range.” (David Brin, *Infinity’s Shore*, 1996)... “Dorman felt all of his muscles growing tense in preparation for an encounter that he could not hope to avoid if his voice carried less far than it would have done if he had been just a little nearer.” (Frank Belknap Long, “Monster From Out of Time”)... “Circling us ominously, its huge vanes flapping like the wings of a hungry vampire bat, was a stark white helicopter...” (Kendell Foster Crossen, *Year of Consent*, 1954)... “Even in the black slacks and sweatshirt, the curves of her rock-hard body undulated without mercy.” (Steve Perry & Gary A. Braunbek, *Isaac Asimov’s I-Bots: Time Was*, 1998)... *Dept of T. S. Eliot’s Influence*: “And now I can sense Penelope’s influence everywhere, like a faint pollutant distorting the light, creating gaudy, unnatural sunsets like a disembowelled horse spreading its guts across the heavens.” (James Miller, “Weak End” in *Dark Terrors 4*, 1998.)



Picture: Beth Gwin

Out of the Pulphouse

Kristine Kathryn Rusch
interviewed by
Jayme Lynn Blaschke

Few people have had as diverse an impact on science fiction and fantasy as Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Winner of the John W. Campbell Award in 1990 for best new writer, Rusch made her mark with powerfully emotional short stories. In 1989 she shared a World Fantasy Award with her husband and collaborator, Dean Wesley Smith, for their work on Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine. From 1991 to 1997 she edited The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, for which she won the Hugo Award for best editor in 1994. Recently, she has refocused her energies on her writing career.

It's been well over a year since you turned over the editorial reins of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction to Gordon Van Gelder. Have you suffered any withdrawals?

No, not really. I miss the readers. There was quite a conversation going on with the readers. They tend to write a lot of letters, have opinions – I miss that quite a bit. I suspect that within a year or so I'm going to miss the contact with the new writers, but I was approaching burnout. I was getting tired. So I'm just in that recovery stage at the moment, and I suspect once I get through it, I'm going to be like, "Whoa. Who are these new writers coming up, and how come I don't know about them?" I might have to do a project or something to figure out who they are.

You were editor there for six years. What insight did you, as a writer, gain from working in the editorial side of the business?

Actually, what I gained as a writer is hard to quantify on the art level. I can see a quantum difference in my own writing – especially in short fiction – because something went into the back of the brain that wasn't there before. As far as what I can actually talk

about, what I learned was the business of writing. I learned what it's like to be on the editor's side of the desk, that it's difficult, that it's not always as cut and dried as it seems. There are publishing issues that have to be considered. I think editors work much harder than writers ever give them credit for. I learned that there are writers that are fun to work with and there are writers that are incredibly difficult to work with, and there are writers I would never work with again. So applying that to myself as a writer means that I want to be one of those writers that is easy to work with and somebody you like to have around, simply because you get more work that way.

So what'd you learn that came as a surprise?

I didn't expect writers to be hard to work with. I'd always listened to hard-luck stories of several writers, and I figured "Wow, life treated them hard." Gradually I realized, no, that wasn't the case. To give a corporate analogy, if you're working in an office, they're the ones who come in and mess up the place, and work very hard at not working. Writing, like any other profession, has a few of those people.

They complain the loudest about not getting paid, and yet they're the ones who don't really do the work. These usually aren't published writers. These are writers who want to break into the business. It was quite a revelation. I was quite shocked.

It's long been said that the real innovation and trends in science fiction and fantasy emerge first from short fiction. What new directions did you see develop while you were editor?

There were the abuse themes. A lot of people were beginning to speak out about various abuse issues – mostly in fantasy. In science fiction, I noticed that the writers were reluctant to talk about far futures. It was almost as if they were frightened of it, and I think that's changing, slowly. It was just beginning to change as I was leaving, but they were reluctant to deal with outer-space science fiction, which I found really frustrating as an editor, because that's one of the roots of science fiction. I think there was an awful lot of contemporary fantasy that was very, very good, up until about 1991 and '92. Then people said "Oh! Contemporary fantasy sells!" And they weren't doing work as good. That always happens. You have the innovators, and then you have the folks that come in and see that it sells and try to do the same thing, and it's not quite as good. I think we're going to be seeing a lot of cloning stories in the near future, and I don't think that's a bad thing. It's a good thing, because the technology has made an advance and it's time for science fiction to talk about it. That's pretty much how it works. I'm hoping the writers are going to look *forward* a little bit more.

Why was it that "contemporary fantasy" suddenly caught fire? It's not exactly a new concept.

Actually, I think it's not contempo-

*...they were
reluctant to deal
with outer-space
science fiction...*

rary fantasy that's really taken a boom, it's that sub-genre, Urban Fantasy, that's taken a huge boom and went in new directions. What I'm really thinking of when I talk about that is Emma Bull, Will Shetterly and that whole Minneapolis group initially that went at it. Then Charles de Lint and Jane Yolen started doing this kind of work, and a handful of other people. They were taking fantasy tropes and they weren't writing about what you would expect. They were taking elves and putting them in the middle of Minneapolis, and they were using werewolves in whole new ways. Charles de Lint took Native American mysticism, and he used it to explore the way that the world works now. Talk about a whole aspect of the culture that hardly anybody's ever talked about

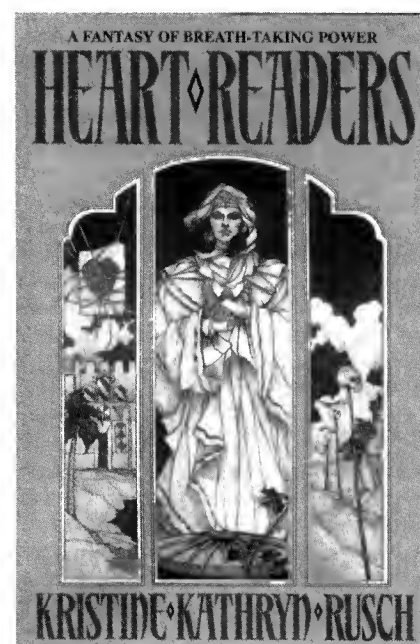
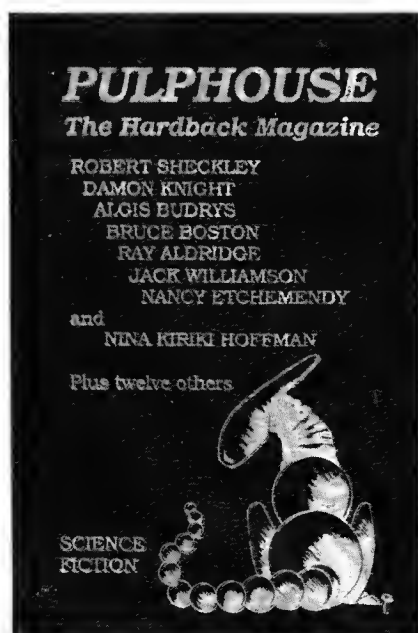
before in our genre. We do have a mystical aspect to Western culture. Most people ignore it, but it exists in contemporary America. There is an underlying belief that the urban fantasists really tapped into, and did so in a unique and original way.

Let's backtrack a bit. You mentioned there wasn't much far-future science fiction being written, even though that was the core of the field for years and years. What happened? Are writers afraid of the future?

This is a guess about what's going on with writers: they're terrified that with changing technology, their story's going to be out of date 15 years from now, even though it's set in the year 2060. Well, I think that's likely, because even if you set a story in the year 2001, chances are you'll have anachronisms if it's written in 1998. Also, Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke so dominated the field that I think it took a long time for us to notice that no one else was doing it.

That's changing, though, isn't it? You can go into almost any book store and find works by Greg Bear or Greg Benford along with newer writers.

Bear and Benford were always doing it. I think Greg Egan is a good case in point. Rob Sawyer's been taking some looks at some far stuff. Some of Sean Stewart's stuff is near-future, but still has that *feel* of far future. I think a lot of folks are taking a look at it. A lot of folks are taking a look at it and saying "What kind of stories can we tell?" and beginning to realize that we can tell some really interesting stories in the far future. Again, I think the Mars Pathfinder mission, and a lot of the deep-space stuff that NASA's doing – I mean, science fiction fed NASA for years and inspired them, and now I think NASA's starting to inspire science-fiction writers again. And I think



that's a cool thing. I can't touch on this topic without saying that part of the reason sf writers are not exploring far-future science fiction is because *Star Trek* has done it, and is doing it and it has pervaded the culture in such a way that a lot of the people believe that this may be the way the future is going to be structured.

You yourself have done a lot of work in media tie-ins, both with Star Trek and Star Wars. What's the appeal? It is the ultimate fan-fic. *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* have taken over our love of space opera in many, many areas. Kids will come in and they'll start reading those books first. I believe we need transition books after those where they can read space opera à la *Star Trek* and à la *Star Wars* and then they want to read space opera à la Greg Bear, say, but they need a stepping stone in between. Hardly anyone is writing that. Lois McMaster Bujold is writing it, and there are a handful of others, but not enough. There should always be more, because there are an awful lot of kids who drop out of the science-fiction field after they've read their *Star Trek* novels simply because they can't get the same fix. I can only do media tie-ins that I love. I love *Star Wars*, I love *Star Trek*. I want to be able to have a starting place for kids to read. Not just my fiction, but science fiction. If they're going to be reading *Star Trek* books, why not have them read *Star Trek* books with real science in them?

You're allowed to use real science in them? Sure you are. There were years there where it wasn't happening, but now there's an awful lot of these books that do use real science. Now, with *Star Wars* I had a great time, because you can't do real science but you can

They were taking elves and putting them in the middle of Minneapolis...

do the stuff that was in the *Lensmen* series, that sort of thing. I have an asteroid belt that simply could not exist in nature in my *Star Wars* book. Each asteroid has a different environment, okay? It was immensely freeing, because all I had to concentrate on was the story. And sometimes our quest for getting our science right or getting our history right or getting our facts right withers the story.

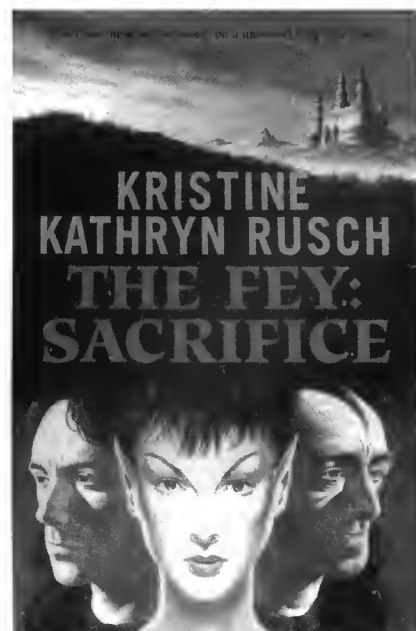
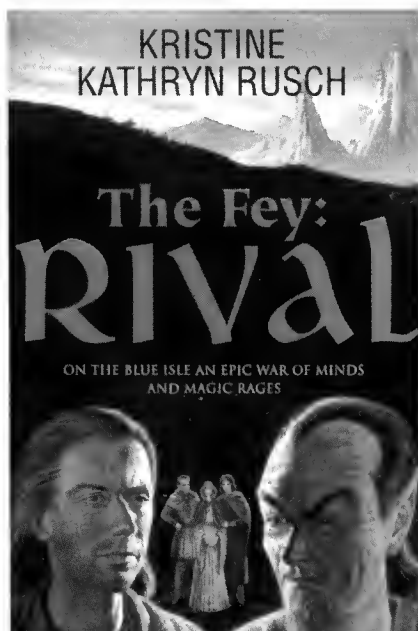
Media tie-ins have caught more flak recently for dumbing-down science fiction and taking up shelf space. Yeah, I've heard that too. I don't believe it. At all. The midlist was in trouble anyway. It's a separate problem. The midlist was in trouble because the books weren't selling. Publishing has changed in the last 15 years. Book stores now have com-

puter inventory systems, so instead of having a publisher tell them "Yes, yes, Kris Rusch's books sell really well," now they can look on the computer and see whether or not Kris Rusch's books really do sell well. That killed a lot of books. The wholesale distribution network has changed – that also killed markets for books. It had nothing to do with media tie-ins.

Obviously, editing took up much of your time, and your writing suffered for it. Now that you've freed yourself up, you've started getting back to your roots in short fiction.

I was a very prolific short-story writer, and I pretty much stopped. I was looking at my bibliography the other day. In 1991 I had something like 20 short stories published, and in 1992 it was maybe 13, and in 1993 it was like eight and 1994 it was six, and 1995 it was two, and 1996 it was one. You could look at it and see the decline in my short fiction as a result of working at *F&SF*. The novels didn't get hurt, just the short stories, and part of that was because I was reading so many of them, and thinking how to make other people's short stories better instead of thinking of my own. But a lot of it was really time-related. I was working half-time at *F&SF*, I was getting paid half-time salary, yet I was putting in 40 hours a week, and writing novels 40 hours a week. I was really, *really* working hard, and some of it was just plain old tiredness that I didn't realize until I quit.

So why is it that your novels, the more time-intensive projects, didn't suffer instead of your short fiction? Because a novel is easy. It's not easy to write a novel, but a novel is... Most of my novels come from my short stories, so the actual difficulty of creation happens in the short story, not the novel. Once the novel is



in place, once I know what I'm going to write about, I don't have to go through the moulding process. It's very difficult to describe, but if you think of it as working in clay, the short story is where I figure out what I'm going to make – whether I'm going to make a pot or an urn. And the novel is actually making it into the shape and putting the paint on it. But I had already figured out what for me is the tough part, whether it's going to be a pot or an urn. I think one of the reasons I ended up having to quit *F&SF* at the point I did was because I was not ready to make short stories. I wasn't taking those risks, and didn't have the emotional energy to take those risks. So I looked down the road, and in about three years I wouldn't have had any novels left to write. It *all* would've gone away.

You say you tackle the more emotional, gut-wrenching topics in your short fiction. Gallery of His Dreams was one of the high points in your early short-fiction career. It's an emotionally draining story to read – was it that way to write?

You should ask my husband that question. The first draft of that story – *Gallery of His Dreams* is a novella – was 3,000 words long, and I thought it was brilliant. And I handed it to him and I asked "What do you think?" and he said "It makes no sense." Now what you miss in this exchange was that he was hiding behind the refrigerator at the time, with the door open, because he knew that would really, really upset me. And it did. So we had quite a bit of shouting after that, at which point I realized that yes, he was right. It was 3,000 words and it made no sense at all. He said "Write it so that it makes sense to me." And I did, and I ended up with a 20,000-word novella. The 3,000 words were gut-wrenching, but

...the minute a writer gets really tired of what they are doing, they should quit.

the novella wasn't.

That's a story where everything came together and worked. Now that you've returned to short fiction, do you expect to achieve that kind of resonance, that intensity again?

Oh, I've seen authors do it all the time. Speaking as an editor, it's definitely possible, but I'll tell you when it's not possible: it's not possible for the author that *tries* to do it. If I were to look at *Gallery of His Dreams* and say "Okay, it's a novella. It's a Civil War story. It's got science fiction in it." If I try to write another Civil War science-fiction novella to recapture *Gallery of His Dreams*, it wouldn't be as good. And, chances are, if I'm going to write another story that's going to be as good as *Gallery of His Dreams*, I'm not going to know it, not

until I'm in the process of writing it, or maybe even after I'm finished. You just have to trust the process. If you trust the process, you end up catching lightning in a bottle again somewhere down the road.

Do you think that's why so many series begin strongly and then decline in future volumes?

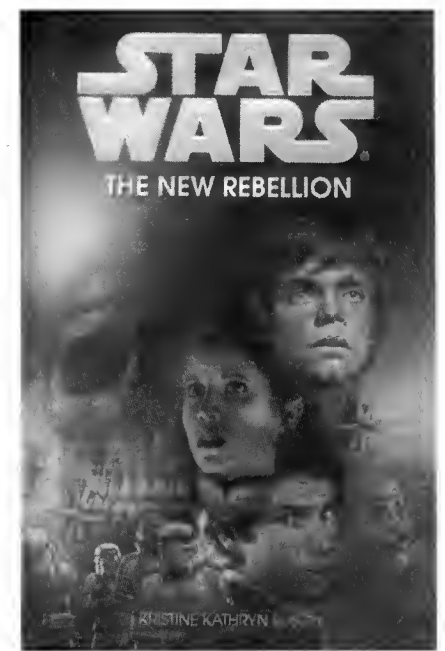
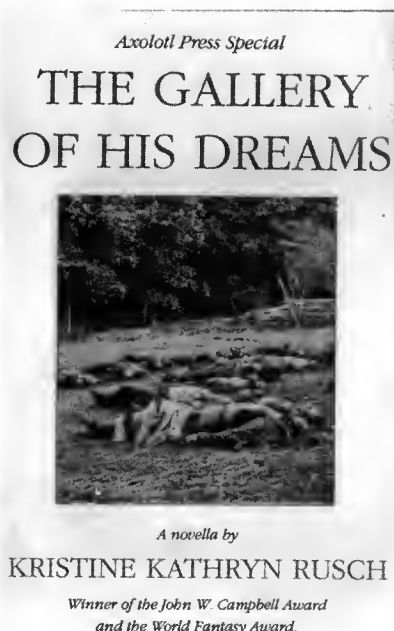
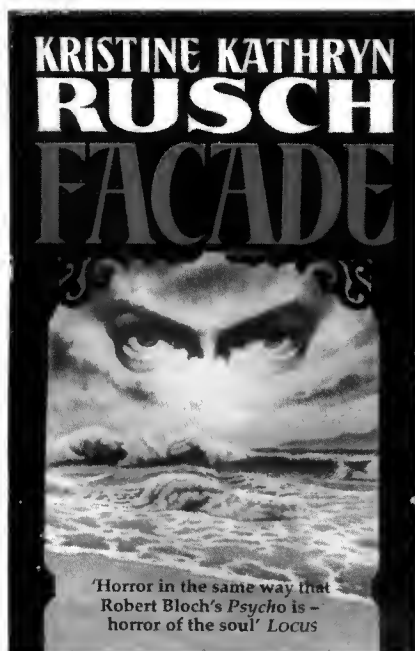
I think a series is a different matter. It depends on how the writer plans the series. If the writer plans to write three books or ten books or whatever its going to be, if it's planned as that kind of project from the beginning, chances are all the books are going to be good, or of equivalent quality. If the writer writes a book and then has all their fans come up afterward and say "Oh, you should write another one in X world," or the editor saying "You know, I'd love to see more books in this world," I think you end up with books that aren't as good. I think it really has to be planned from the beginning. I also think that the minute a writer gets really tired of what they're doing, they should quit.

Have you seen that a lot?

Yeah, I've seen writers get tired. Sometimes all they need is a couple years' break from the project, but sometimes they really need to say "I'm done." It's hard if the project is making that writer a lot of money. For heaven's sake, Conan Doyle tried to kill Sherlock Holmes and it didn't work.

You're currently working on your own ongoing fantasy series, The Fey. What makes you believe you have a concept that can sustain such a long-term project?

I was a history major in college, and I just tend to accumulate weird facts. They hit the surface of my brain and



they just stick there. I got the idea for *The Fey* somewhere in 1981 or '82, but it wasn't anything really developed. When I started working on *The Fey*, I described it to my editor as a Hundred Years' War. Now, if you've read *The Fey*, you realize I haven't gotten anywhere close to a hundred years. We're in the first 20 years, and I'm starting in on book five. If this series sells well, I could probably go the full hundred years. It may take me 20 years to write, but I know the cycle is going to be long. We're talking Wars of the Roses here. And there are a lot of stories in there, and they don't necessarily have to be about the same characters. As I wrote the first book, I realized I'd started in the wrong place. Essentially, I'd started in year 50 of my hundred years' war, and to explain what was going to happen I had to go back. So really, we're talking 150 years, but I don't want to scare people.

What does working in a long-term series allow you to do as opposed to single-volume works?

Well, for me it's no different than doing a shorter book, except that it's longer – because the whole story in my head is a long story. It does give me time to play with certain characters I probably wouldn't have played with and other aspects, but that's probably not true either, because they're all important to the story I'm trying to tell. A story is as long as it needs to be. I could never have written this series if I didn't have a story long enough to tell. It affords some freedom, but mostly it's more complex than I expected off the top. I have probably a thousand pages of notes that are arranged in the order of a history text. I mean, my Windows file is like "Fey Culture" and "Magic" and subheadings under that. If you want the textbook on *The Fey* I've got it.

It's not in any great order, but it's there, because I needed it to check myself on facts as I'm going along.

Well, you're just that much more prepared for when your publisher wants to come out with The Guide to the World of The Fey.

Hey, I'm there. Of course, somebody would have to put it in some coherent order and put real sentences in there.

You were a finalist for the Clarke Award in 1995 for Alien Influences, a book that didn't come out in the U.S. until 1997. How'd that unusual situation happen?

I didn't screw it up – my publisher screwed it up. *Alien Influences* is a book that initially sold to New American Library. There was quite a bit of interesting publishing problems at the house that had everything to do with the publisher, who was intent on killing the book line at that point. One of the books she wanted to murder was mine. It was *Traitors*, actually, that got really caught in that mess, and my agent at the time said "Uh oh. If they're going to publish *Traitors* in the toilet, that means your career is over, because *Alien Influences* won't get published at all." So we pulled the book, we bought it back – and that's what happened.

Ultimately, the situation's turned out rather well for you. The recognition your book's gotten in Britain certainly doesn't hurt matters any.

I think so. I hope so. Having the prestige of being an Arthur C. Clarke finalist is just thrilling to me. I was at Clarion with Geoffrey Landis and a number of other hard-sf writers who were really teasing me about my history background instead of my science background. And so when I got nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke award, I called Geoff and I said "Geoff,

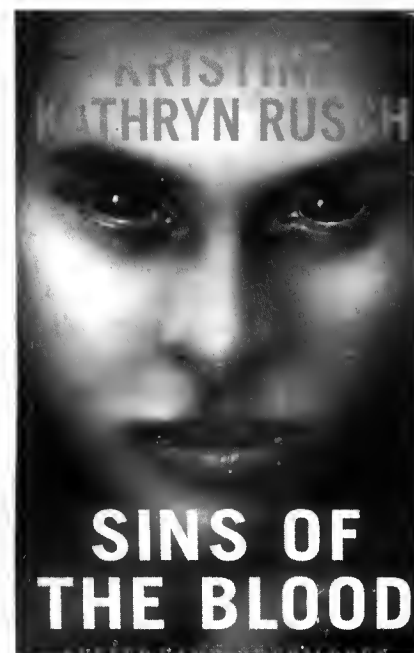
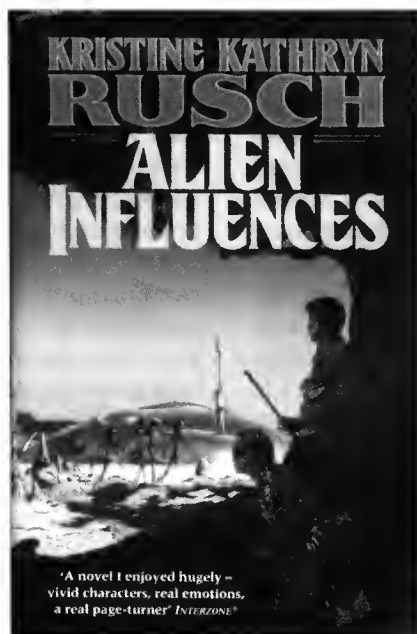
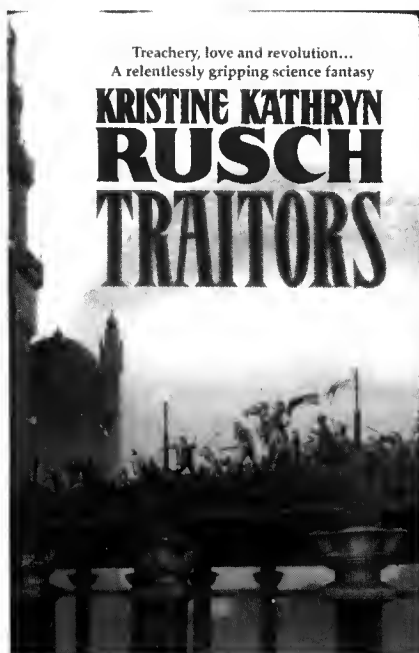
I did it – with a history background!"

Apart from your fantasy and science fiction, you're staking out new territory – historical mystery – with Hitler's Angel. That's a little bit of a departure for you, isn't it?

Actually, it's not. If you look at *Gallery of His Dreams*, which is a historical novella – *Hitler's Angel* started out as a historical, alternate-history novella. Hitler's niece was murdered, in his apartment, under suspicious circumstances in 1931. If that case had been solved and Hitler had been found guilty – I have no doubt he was guilty of that murder – the entire history of the Western world would've changed, and millions of lives would've been saved. But as I started writing that alternate-history novella, I realized that while I have a great imagination – this is a very sad thing to say – I'm not sure I have the capacity to imagine a world without Hitler. What kind of world would we be sitting in 1998 if we hadn't had that huge cataclysm of World War II? Maybe I will write that someday, but at that point when I sat down to write that particular book I couldn't figure it out.

So what changed that allowed you to make it a novel?

I looked at the project again and realized I did have a detective story. We know from the beginning that the detective's going to fail – how do you make it interesting? And that became the writing problem instead. I didn't think the book was going to sell. I thought it was too arty. Here you have a mystery novel where you know exactly how it's going to end and you know he's going to fail. And it sold right out of the chute, and everybody's quite excited about it. I'm really pleased with it. It turned out the way I wanted it to. [Z]



The Sixth VNM

Tony Ballantyne

The explosion occurred in what's misleadingly referred to as hyperspace. My so-called hyperdrive was untouched, but the astrogation system was wiped completely. This is what you get for believing the nonsense you read in the sales brochures about triple redundancy: lost light years from home in a state-of-the-art spaceship. At first I couldn't believe it, I checked and rechecked the astrogator every hour, just in case it had started working again. Gradually, however, my confidence gave way to tears of anger and despair at the thought of never seeing my family and friends again. Why had I ever decided to take this stupid holiday, seeing the sights of the galaxy? I must have spent four days staring through an observation bubble; crying at the unfairness of it all, but I've always been a practical man. Before I abandoned myself to despair I had set the HyperRadar scanning the local ten light year bubble for a suitable planet where I might live out my time in solitary comfort. They found one within a week and had the ship skipping on its way whilst I lay on my bunk, railing at the unfairness of it all. I didn't know how unfair things were until I tried to land and discovered the explosion had also knocked out the re-entry systems. That's how I came to find myself standing on Clarkworld with nothing more than a spacesuit and a lunch box containing the survival kit.

Now, Clarkworld wasn't much to look at, but I could have done worse. The landscape was rock and gravel, not the molten lava or frozen sea I might have expected,

and the planet had an atmosphere of sorts. Too thin and poisonous maybe, but my spacesuit could keep me alive for a year. More than enough time for the survival kit to do its stuff. I opened the reinforced adamantium case, looked inside and my spirits fell to absolute bottom. There was nothing there but six so-called Von Neumann Machines. Six subtly differing little grey cylinders fitted neatly into a foam base. I shook them onto the rocky planet and watched as all but one of them disappeared into the ground. The last lay on its side, motionless. I picked it up and examined it carefully. The base of the tiny metal cylinder was covered in dark soot. Its circuits must have been blown by the electromagnetic pulse of the explosion.

I gave a sardonic laugh. For the record, there are many things I find implausible, but three things that really stretch credibility are Hyperspace, Von Neumann Machines and Artificial Intelligence. Hyperspace: something made up by advertising people to sell their spaceships. I ask you, if the word 'Universe' means everything there is, how can we leave it to travel through it? It doesn't make any sense. Machines that can make copies of themselves? Have you ever really thought about that concept? You always need an extra part. Design the gadget that makes the motor or whatever, then make the device to build the gadget, and then the doohickey to build the device... It goes on forever.

And as for Artificial Intelligence...

Anyway. That was my survival kit. Out of the box and probably trying to tunnel its way back to Earth. So much for Von Neumann Machines. The odd thing is, however, there must have been some mechanism at work, because after a minute or so the ground began to change. Grooves formed in the rock and mounds of gravel heaped themselves up. One of the machines must have been tunnelling back and forth like a little mole. The grooves formed themselves into letters and the following message appeared.

Tech Level One.

Do you need a Doctor?

If you do not, please stand here ==>

I read the message and moved to where the arrow indicated. I stood there for about ten minutes until I felt silly. I had the feeling someone was playing a joke on me. Hiding behind a hill and laughing at me standing there like a lemon. I felt embarrassed as I wandered off to explore the planet.

Clarkworld is a dull world. Grey slabs of rock litter grey plains of gravel surrounded by grey mountains, all under a dull sky (grey). The only place of interest on the whole planet is the site of the space wreck. Here you can see the remains of a ship that crash-landed here many years ago in mysterious circumstances. Oh no. That was my ship. I keep forgetting; there is nothing of interest on Clarkworld.

I began wandering the gravel plains. I climbed the grey mountains and looked down from their grey peaks onto other grey gravel plains. I drank distilled water and sucked food concentrate from my spacesuit and practised throwing stones at other stones. What else was there to do?

And that was it for three weeks until an indicator in my helmet flashed to say the air was breathable. When

I came to think of it, the sky had been looking more blue than grey these past few days. At first I thought it was a helmet malfunction. How could the air be breathable? Can you imagine the rate of reproduction to make enough machines to change an atmosphere? Let's do a few rough calculations. I seem to remember there are about ten to the power of 40 atoms in Earth's atmosphere. Okay. Suppose a Von Neumann machine makes a copy of itself every ten minutes. A reasonable assumption if you believe the advertising brochures. After one hour there would be two to the six or 64 of them. After a day there would be two times ten to the power of 43 of the little buggers. They could generate an atom of atmosphere each and we'd have enough left over for 1,999 other planets. According to my calculations, at three weeks to change the atmosphere, the lazy little sods mustn't have been in any particular hurry to get the job done. The excess heat from the building would be enough to warm the planet to a pleasant temperature, there was plenty of raw material around in the shape of grey rock. The whole thing is implausible to say the least. Can you see why I don't believe in Von Neumann machines? They must have done it another way.

I made my way back to the wreck of the spaceship. There was another message waiting for me in the rock.

Tech Level Two.

Priority? Please stand in the appropriate space.

Doctor => HyperRadio => Food and Water => Shelter =>

I had enough food and water and I didn't need a shelter, so I choose HyperRadio. With any luck it might get a signal through to Earth and someone could come and get me off this planet.

Life on Clarkworld was much improved now I could breathe the atmosphere. No more long boring days spent scrabbling over rocks and gravel in a spacesuit. Now I could while away the time scrabbling over the rocks wearing nothing but my gloves and boots. It was nice to feel fresh air on my skin after a month in the spacesuit.

Whilst I idled away my days, the self-replicating machines were hard at work nearby. Over the next two days a HyperRadio mast grew behind the hills just beyond where my spaceship had crashed. A dull silver grey spire, it glinted oddly in the pale sunlight that washed Clarkworld.

I walked and scrambled over the low hills to the mast's base. From close up, I could see it was made of the bodies of millions of dull silver Von Neumann machines. They had evolved a special shape for building. Each machine tessellated in three dimensions, the bodies fitting together smoothly and securely like surrealist toy building bricks. Standing at the base of the tower I looked up along its seemingly infinite length disappearing into the sky. As stood there, wondering if it had begun signalling to Earth, a rather unpleasant idea occurred to me. These Von Neumann machines reproduced and died, leaving their bodies as building blocks. What if some alien intelligence had seeded the Earth with life, millions of years ago? At some time in the future a signal could be sent compelling us to form structures from our bodies. Radio masts and shelters built of human skeletons. Maybe there is a creature lying forgotten, buried beneath the Earth somewhere, waiting for its creations to finish their task and make the world suitable for its survival.

We humans are certainly altering the Earth's environment already. Maybe the alien creature wants an atmosphere that's a lot warmer and full of hydrocarbons from burnt oil.

If it does, I hope for its sake that it's having a better time being stranded than I am.

I made my way back to the point where I originally released the machines. There was a surprise waiting for me. A long low building constructed from the dead bodies of Von Neumann machines. The building was in the shape of the letter U, the two long wings of the building surrounding the wreckage of my spaceship. Thinking back on it logically, it made sense for the machines, having completed my radio mast, to work through the other items on the priority list. Nonetheless, to suddenly see this sign of civilization in what had previously been a wilderness gave me quite a start.

I entered the building with some trepidation through an open arch in one wing of the U. The inside was a hollow shell lit by a soft yellow glow that seemed to come from the bodies of the machines. I wandered down one wing of the building to the crossbar of the U. Three machines sat there waiting for me. A coffin-like autodoc, a food dispenser and a very basic projection monitor. The monitor was beaming a message onto one of the blank grey walls:

Tech Level Three.

Generic Manufacturing Phase is now beginning

Please await further Messages...

I stared at the wall for a while but no more messages were forthcoming. I guessed that machines were busy replicating themselves deep beneath the ground, churning out the parts needed to keep me in the manner to which I wished to become accustomed.

I tried the food dispenser. It delivered a brick of food concentrate and a plastic cup of distilled water. The brick tasted wonderful after four weeks of helmet syrup. It was so nice to have food you could chew. After the food dispenser I went and lay in the autodoc for a while. I emerged feeling much the same, albeit with a perfect manicure and pedicure. I suppose that after four weeks of exercise and a guaranteed balanced (though rather bland) diet from the helmet, I was rather healthier than when I first landed on Clarkworld.

After that I was at a bit of a loss for what to do. I was well fed, healthy and rested. I was becoming bored again. I amused myself for a while dispensing food bricks and stamping on them. They splatted quite satisfactorily, staining my grey surroundings with dull yellow, but after a while (three days) I tired of this game and resumed my exploration of Clarkworld.

The planet was much the same, grey stone, grey gravel, pale sun in a blue grey sky, although now when I was walking I would occasionally notice a vague wisp of black smoke curling up from behind the distant hills. At night, lying snug and secure beneath the strange stars, I would hear noises just on the edge of imagination. Somewhere deep beneath the ground my metal buddies were hard at work manufacturing generically. Whatever that meant.

Seven days after I first found the U-shaped building it changed. The interior was no longer empty. It had been partitioned off into separate rooms, each containing a

pleasant surprise. One room contained a collection of soft, comfortable chairs, another, a bed and a wardrobe. I checked inside but there were no clothes as yet. There was an office with a desk, even a bathroom with a toilet roll holder. When I found the cupboard containing the neat pyramid of soft white toilet rolls I burst into tears. Why? Well, you try and figure out what I'd been using for toilet paper those past five weeks.

I wandered through the building with a silly smile on my face. When I reached the room with the projection monitor I almost jumped for joy. The monitor had been attached to a small alphanumeric keyboard. The message on the wall now read:

Tech Level Four.

Information Processing and Rapid Expansion

Prompt > |

A cursor flashed next to the word Prompt. I thought for a moment and then began to type.

Prompt > Help

A message flashed up in reply.

The following commands are currently available:

Radio Autodoc FoodDis GM

VNM1 VNM2 VNM3 VNM4 VNM5

I hesitated for a moment and then tapped in the command:

Prompt > Radio

And received the reply,

The correct use of this command is:

Radio [Help] [Status] [Send] [Received]

I tried Radio Status and the reply came up:

Radio transmit duration 00:00:07:22:43:16

Send Message: "Help Help Help! I've crashed!! Somebody Help Me!!!"

Messages received: - none -

I won't bore you by describing the rest of the computer commands. They were all pretty similar. The only positive thing I achieved was to delete some of the exclamation marks from the radio send message.

One thing struck me, however, and you may wonder why this was the first time it had occurred to me. The five VNM commands referred to the five Von Neumann Machines I released when I first crashed on the planet. In all the time I had been there it never occurred to me to worry about the sixth VNM, the one that was broken. What was it supposed to have done?

Two weeks passed and the surface of Clarkworld had finally begun to liven up. Buildings grew from the grey surface on a daily basis. Roads and paths began to lay themselves and a little village began to take root, complete with gravel gardens and a village pond. My days began to take shape. I spent the first hour after waking up working out in the gym that had sprouted opposite the village pond. Breakfast was a food brick, after that I spent time on the telescope spying out the surrounding planet. I wasn't sure, but there seemed to be a helicopter factory being built in the direction I referred to for the sake of argument as north. I hoped I was right. It would be nice to have a helicopter.

Lunch was another food brick and then it was off to the games room for an afternoon of billiards or crazy golf or whatever took my fancy. A food brick for dinner and then an evening on the computer checking out the new commands that were added on a daily basis. In this way I discovered the new features my friends the Von Neu-

mann Machines were adding to Clarkworld on a daily basis. Did I say friends? Oh they had me fooled back then. I think I almost believed in the idea of a self-replicating machine at that point. Little did I know that they were just pretending to be my friends so that they could stab me in the back. Tech Level 5 was coming.

I left my house and walked down a white paved walkway towards the new dining hall. Streetlights had appeared in Clarktown about a week ago. Ornate metal confections, they arched over the road like art deco trees. I must say, I missed seeing real trees, but I suppose it was too much to expect the Von Neumann Machines to contain seed mappings. As I walked to my breakfast I was suddenly bathed in wonderful yellow warmth. I looked up to see a yellow sun shining down from a deep blue sky and I felt a surge of happiness run through me. It was like being back on Earth. What a fool I was. Couldn't I see how those machines were getting out of control? Why didn't I wonder how they could have altered the sun?

I enjoyed the sunlight for a moment and then walked in for breakfast. There I encountered my second surprise. There was a robot sitting at the table, head propped up by one arm, listlessly stirring a cup of distilled water with its finger. It looked up as I approached.

"Hello?" I said, rather hesitantly.

"Hello," it replied. "My name is Klanky. What's yours?"

"James Clark. What's going on?"

The robot rose to its feet and held out two silver grey arms in welcome. Its metal face creased into a smile.

"James, I'm here to tell you the good news. The final Von Neumann machine is fully active. Tech Level Five has been achieved! Artificial Intelligence!! I await your orders."

Never trust a robot, particularly one that uses exclamation marks when it speaks.

"You want my orders? Like what? Can you take me home?"

The robot pulled out a chair for me and indicated that I should sit down. I did so weakly. It sat on the table before me, head propped in one arm, one leg kicking gently back and forth.

"Take you home? We're gearing up to that now, though it may take some time. We've no idea where we are in space. We tried to resurrect the astrogation systems on your ship but the hyperspace memory-addressing pointers are completely wiped. We're now embarking on a phase of research into our galactic neighbourhood. The manufacture of the first space probes is coming along nicely."

"So how long before I'll be going home?"

"We would guess about, what... two years?"

I sucked my lip for a moment. A question occurred to me.

"What is this we you keep talking about?"

The robot gave a metal smile.

"The whole VNM/AI survival system. The five Von Neumann machines that make up the survival system work on a boot strapping system. The first VNM deals with basic survival. It builds an autodoc then sorts out the atmosphere and any dangerous life forms, should they be present. When that's done it sets off the second VNM to work on general survival, then the third and so on. The fourth VNM built a computer environment where the ayletts could take root."

"Ayletts?"

"Sorry, it's a nickname for AI-lets, the building blocks of an AI system. Named after Sally Aylett, the computer scientist who first

designed them."

To think I swallowed the enormous fibs that robot was telling! I almost overlooked the question that has already, no doubt, occurred to you.

"Hold on," I said. "You say five Von Neumann machines. There were six in the survival pack."

"No there weren't," replied the robot.

"Yes there were. The sixth was broken."

"Well, it doesn't appear in my schema anywhere, so you must be wrong. Anyway, what can I do for you to make the next two years pass more pleasantly? Is there anything you want?"

"How about a woman?" I said flippantly.

"No problem," said Klanky.

It wasn't, either. The autodoc must have contained mappings of human beings of both sexes. Klanky's crew took a sample of my tissue, swapped a Y chromosome for an X, and then cloned it. I suppose it was fortunate I was a man... Tech Level Four machines built a rapid cell generation machine and two weeks later I had a fully functioning woman with a mental age of about one day. Klanky wasn't happy with this and set about making me another one. This time he developed a range of speed learning techniques and I had a partner I could speak to on equal terms. I called her Eve.

Now this is where things begin to get really silly, because why stop there? Klanky didn't see any reason for doing so. He built another woman to keep Eve company, and then a man for me so I could have some male companionship... Soon we had a village, then a town, then a city and then... you get the picture? I began to wonder why I actually wanted to go back to Earth. Klanky was having the same thoughts. He met me about a year after our original conversation. He'd changed. His mechanical body was convincingly human. For some reason he had chosen to make it look like Elvis Presley, heaven knows how he had found out about him. Klanky looked worried.

"James," he said. "I'm worried." His voice had changed too, perfectly human with a Lancastrian accent. His Elvis impersonation wasn't as accurate as he liked to think.

"James, doesn't this rapid expansion worry you?"

"Why?" I said carefully. I had only just begun to suspect that Klanky was lying to me somehow.

Klanky looked glum. "The Von Neumann Machines have taken over this planet. We've got some loaded on board a spaceship ready to establish a base in the next solar system. All this after only a year. The original AI program has been rewriting itself. It's now so clever it's beginning to question why it's keeping humans alive on this planet at all. I'm sure it's only because you amuse it. Robots like me, who have care of humans built into our programs, don't even get listened to."

Klanky said the last words with some bitterness. He gyrated his hips for a moment before speaking.

"I worked something out the other day. If we continue to expand at our current rate we'll have taken over the entire universe in less than a hundred years. I put this to the new AI but it said I was being silly. It said it would take a lot less time than that. It also thinks there's a far worse danger. It wants to know why somebody else hasn't taken over the universe already. You can't be the only human to have got lost in space."

The implication took a while to sink in. If someone else had got lost in space, their VNMs would be expanding at a frightening rate as well. Surely somebody had thought of that when they designed them? The answer came in a blinding flash.

"The sixth Von Neumann Machine!" I called out excitedly. One of my clone women glanced at me in surprise, then resumed her conversation with her clone friend.

"Don't you understand, Klanky? The sixth machine could have been some sort of retarder. It would be designed to stop things getting out of hand. Let's face it, this situation is completely over the top."

As I spoke the truth finally dawned. Of course the situation was completely over the top. I was a fool to have thought otherwise. I'd never believed in Von Neumann Machines or AI to begin with. What had changed my mind?

Klanky was giving me a funny look.

"James, how many times do we have to tell you, there was no sixth machine. It's not in the programming schema."

Of course not, I thought. It wouldn't have been included in your programs. It wouldn't be very nice, knowing your executioner was in the same box as you. Anyway, the treacherous little buggers would probably have ganged up on it and destroyed it. I dismissed the thoughts. What was I doing, letting Klanky lure me into his conversation? He didn't exist.

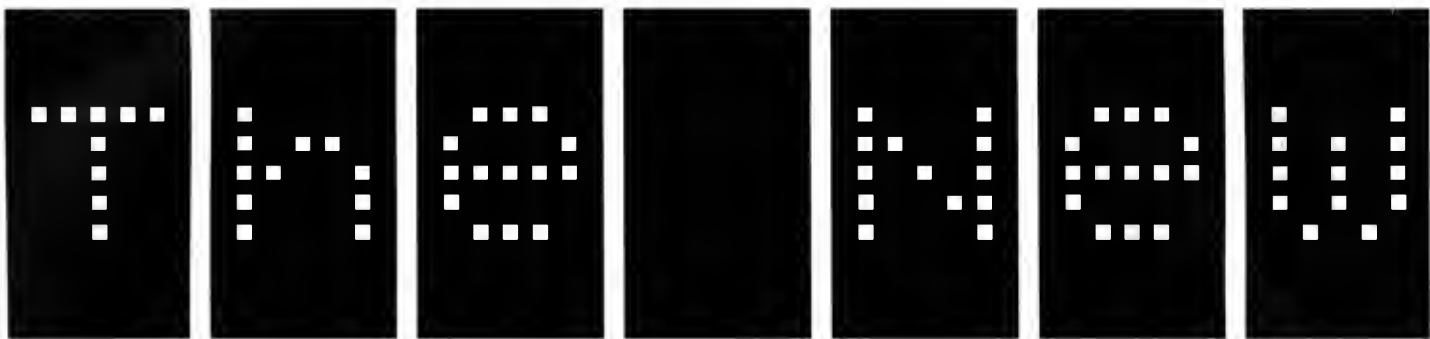
"James!" said Klanky urgently. "The AI is talking of arming this planet. We must defend ourselves against encroachment by other VNM civilizations. The AI wants to expand across the galaxy as quickly as possible before anyone else does. We must get strong quickly..."

...but I ignored what he was saying. I was figuring it out. Being trapped on this planet with no company for over a year would be enough to send any man mad. I must be lying in a corner somewhere, curled up by my crashed spaceship sucking food and water from my spacesuit and hallucinating. I sent Eve to get my spacesuit for me. It took her a while to find it, but when she did I put it on and lay down here in the corner, by the imaginary table with my imaginary friend Klanky occasionally popping by to talk to me. I dictate this story into my helmet recorder between his visits. It gives me something to do, and when help finally does arrive and you hear this, whoever you are, it may assist you cure my madness faster.

Klanky tells me we have taken the local ten-light-year bubble of space without incident. He says that we have located Earth and are building up the resources to attack them before they attack us. You know you're mad when you spend your days on an alien world discussing the destruction of Earth with Elvis Presley, but it gives me something to do.

The lights that the hallucinatory spaceships make as they take off are rather pretty, too.

Tony Ballantyne makes his *Interzone* debut with the above story. His previously published work consists of a few contributions to women's magazines. He lives in East Ham, London.



This is Columbus Day, which is why I'm home when the doorbell rings. For just that slippery instant, I'm smiling, wondering who took the time. But of course it's nobody. It's just a pair of washed-out middle-aged women and, hanging behind them, some poor little mixed-race kid. Everyone's smiling in an overdone, anticipatory way. And I think to myself, Oh, shit. Seventh-Day Adventists.

The nearest woman says, "Hello," and shoves a little pamphlet at me.

Then before I can think of anything sharp to say, her fat companion tells me, "You have a nice new life." And like that, everyone's backing off my porch.

I shut the door and slip over to the window.

It's the kid who spots me, and smiles. In a blended sort of way, he's cute. His face is the only one that registers with me.

The threesome marches up the street. They don't bother with our neighbours or the next couple of houses. But they cross over to the Bestons' big house. Gloria Beston works at home. She's some kind of consultant. And I'm thinking, This is a little spooky. How do they know she should be home? Which she is. For about two seconds, I can see her arm and a piece of her pretty face. She's wearing something blue. Just like with me, a pamphlet is handed over, then those godly souls are backing off the porch together. And that's the last I see of them. That's when I think to look at my pamphlet. There's some kind of blue and red design on the front. Nothing special. But inside is the big surprise. There's nothing about God or family, but instead there's the words:

"You are now part of the New System."

Like hell I am.

I fold the thing up and throw it away. Forgetting all about it.

My wife has a job in the private sector, which means she works more and has half my pension plan, plus maybe twice the fun. She usually comes home tired, particularly on Monday nights. But not tonight. She shows up lively. Practically laughing, she tells me, "The funniest thing happened at work."

"What happened?" I ask.

"Everybody got the same call. At the same time, our phones rang and we picked up, and this voice was talking to us. Know what it said?"

"What?"

"You are now part of the New System."

"No!"

She says, "Seriously!"

Right off, I'm digging through the kitchen trash. Looking between soggy coffee filters and black banana peels, hunting for that piece of paper.

"What are you doing, Donnie?"

It's not here. I threw it in here, but the coffee grounds must have eaten it.

I look straight at my wife, reminding her, "There's twenty people in your office —"

"Thirty," she says.

"How many phone lines?" But before she answers, I ask, "Are you sure? That the phones rang at the same time?"

"Dead sure," she says, almost giggling.

I say, "This is crazy."

"No, it's just a little weird," is her opinion.

And that's when I tell her about the Adventists who weren't, and the pamphlet that's vanished. Which changes her opinion plenty. And while we're digging through every trash can in the house, I think to ask, "What did the voice sound like?"

"What voice?"

"On the phone. Was a middle-aged woman talking to you?"

She thinks about it for a long moment, then admits, "I'm not sure." Then she calls up the guy who works in the cubicle next to hers, asking what that "New System" voice was like.

"Brent doesn't remember either," she reports.

I'm thinking about going up the street. I really want to ask Gloria how she's doing and if she's still got her pamphlet handy.

What I work for is a tiny piece of the Federal government; we help define Washington's role as it pertains to transportation issues.

My job is basically boring.

But when I get to my desk that next morning, I find my monitor on and waiting for me. "Learn about the New System," I read. "Touch any key to begin. And please, Donnie, take copious notes."

What was only crazy last night has turned real.

And in a slippery way, ordinary.

"Everyone will work a little harder," I read. "At their jobs and in their personal lives, they will take care of themselves, physically as well as spiritually. And with that simple foundation, the world will be renewed."

The type style is simple. Even plain.

What is it here that scares me most?

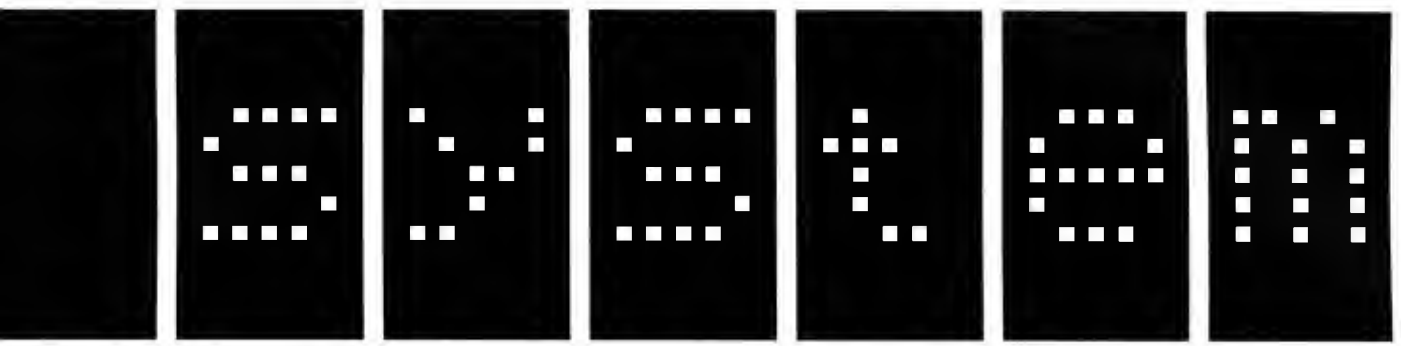
I have to stand and take a few deep breaths. Then I walk next door. My supervisor sits hunched over his monitor, his mouth hanging open, one hand writing rapidly inside a little leather notebook.

"What's this New System about?" I ask.

He looks at me as if I'm an idiot. For an instant, I'm certain that it's all a private delusion, and there's a needle of psychoactive stew waiting for me. But then he shakes his head, asking, "How far have you gotten?"

"How far does it go?" I mumble.

He tells me, "Read on." Then he stares at his screen,



promising, "It's all explained. Just keep going."

I return to my office and sit.

Sure enough, it seems like everything's covered. The specifics as well as the broad generalities. Among other things, I learn that from here on a handshake constitutes a binding contract. Trash that can be recycled will be. Exercise isn't a burden, it's a pleasure. People should brush their teeth after every meal, and they'll wash their hands after every trip to the bathroom. Speed limits are to be obeyed, except on the Interstate. Days will be less rainy, while nights will have quiet downpours. Winters will be brief but bracing. Amazingly, gravity will be dialled back two percent. And dogs won't need leashes again, and while roaming free, they'll show the good sense to keep out of traffic and everyone's recycling bins.

I spend the entire morning reading and taking careful notes, filling maybe a third of a long yellow legal pad.

My only break comes just before noon. Stepping into the men's room, I find this twerp standing in front of a urinal. He works in another part of the Federal building, I remember. And he's busy holding a penis that would make a horse proud.

But that's not weird enough. He has to turn and smile, telling me, "It's new!"

I look up at the white ceiling.

Then he quotes the New System. "Some will receive this," he sings out, "and some will receive that."

"Good for you," I mumble.

I forget to wash my hands.

Feeling weird and maybe a little cheated, I return to my office. But a final promise is waiting for me. "As circumstances dictate," I read, "the New System will receive the occasional tweak and little adjustment."

There's hope, I'm thinking.

And that is, amazingly, the sum total of what I am thinking.

That bliss carries me for the next three days.

At work, my supervisor organizes a series of meetings, and since honesty and efficiency are the watchwords, everyone contributes, speaking with passion about all the things we do badly and how we can improve output and quality. Even I talk. I'm an introvert mostly, but that doesn't shut me up, and when my best suggestions are applauded, I feel as satisfied and as important as I can ever remember being.

Of course others criticize my office and my output, and that means headaches and added work for me. But only for the short term, I tell myself. Only until things have a chance to find their proper place.

My wife and I embrace the same sense of renewal. We eat exactly as we used to eat, only in smaller por-

Robert Reed

tions, and in the evening, we make a point of taking long walks, joined by hundreds of neighbours and their

unleashed dogs. Two nights in row, Gloria Beston is working in her garden. We wave and smile in passing. I can't help but notice how happy everyone seems. Yet none of us mentions the New System. Not by name, we won't. "The weather's lovely," we might say. "And aren't the dogs well-behaved?" With a faint whiff of sarcasm, one man asks, "Isn't it fun recycling milk jugs?" Some neighbours boast that they don't miss television. Which we're free to watch, of course. If you count them, there are fewer restrictions in our lives than ever. But TV is something that should be taken only in small doses – something we've all known for a long, long time.

One elderly woman trumpets, "I'm glad to have lived this long."

Until the New System was in place, she implies. But she won't say those words. It's enough that we know what she means.

Only at home, alone, can my wife and I attempt to discuss what's happened. We review the New System, item by item. Suddenly she waves her notes at me, declaring, "This is God's work. It's got to be."

"Maybe," I reply. Then after a long pause, I admit, "But I don't think so."

"Then who's responsible?" she asks.

"There's a lot of possibilities," I promise. But saying, "Extraterrestrials," isn't going to go over well. So instead, I tell her, "I don't have a name for it."

She maintains, "Whoever's responsible, they've made the world better. Don't you agree?"

"Easily. Yes."

"And I'm better, too," she says, standing in front of her longest mirror.

"Easily. Yes."

She pinches her waist with a new frankness, telling me, "In another few months, I'll have the same body that I had when we married."

Somehow I was hoping for better than that.

She looks my way. "What do you think, Donnie?"

"The old system wasn't working," I reply. "That much is obvious."

Eyes flare, and she asks, "What are you saying?"

"Nothing," I sputter. In reflex.

"That I'm fat? Is that it?"

"Not at all, darling. Not at all!"

On Friday, I lose my job.

While we were busy with our little meetings, Congress and the Department of Transportation as well as our union were having their own get-togethers. Elderly Senators and marble-fleshed bureaucrats were swept along by the sudden honesty, and it was decided

that it was time to admit what everyone always knew in their hearts – our particular tendril of the Federal government accomplishes little, helping almost no one.

Orders come down in the morning, at exactly nine o'clock.

By noon, our office is closed for business. We have the rest of the day to pack and say our goodbyes, and I can tell that people are trying to project a positive attitude. Except for my supervisor who complains, "They never gave us a chance."

He says, "Another few days, and we would have been vital. I know it!"

I don't know what I know.

By two in the afternoon, I'm home. And unsure how to be productive. The handwritten rules on my yellow pad don't seem to offer clear instructions. My yard could stand its final mowing, but I read, "Feel free to let your grass grow long, if you want." My gutters need cleaning, too. But even in the New System, I hate heights. So I settle on doing a load of laundry, then giving the lawn a once over with the rake. Then it's four-thirty and, still brimming with energy, I decide to walk up to the park and back.

I intend to watch for Gloria, but something distracts me.

In the middle of our street, cold and still, is a dark black schnauzer. I've never liked that breed, but somehow the sight of its body leaves me numb. I find myself trembling, walking for several more blocks before I start noticing the world again.

At the edge of the park, the sidewalk is lined with overgrown privet bushes, and that's where the voice comes from. Quiet, plaintive. Someone's standing in the evening shadows. A woman, I realize. Is she one of those who came to my door with the pamphlet? She's the right age and build, and she's whispering to me. She says, "You believe in the New System, don't you?"

"Absolutely," I say.

"Come here," she tells me.

Of course I push my way into the bushes. I'm thinking, Isn't it amazing that there's a force like this? A masterful, decisive force that takes such an incredible interest in the minute details of our lives?

I'm nearly giggling with anticipation.

Then she opens her coat, showing me a pair of floppy breasts. "Suck on them," she advises. "In the New System, men need to enjoy my body."

I pull up short, wondering what to do.

"Please?" she mutters.

"Who are you?" I ask.

She reads my face, and tears start to run on that puffy face.

"You're just making this up," I tell her. Suddenly angry.

She covers her chest, turns and runs. Despite our lesser gravity, she has clumsy, short strides, and she stumbles, collapsing into the leaf litter, sobbing in a large way before she picks herself up and runs on.

I'm not watching.

Instead, I'm staring at my own feet, thinking hard about everything.

My wife remains untroubled.

"It's probably time to change careers anyway," she assures. "This next one will be better. How can it be anything but?"

I make the expected noises, optimism edging toward

giddiness. Then I think to ask, "What about your office? Any openings?"

"I can't hire you, Donnie."

"Nepotism?" I mutter, trying to recall any pertinent new rules.

"No. It's because we just terminated half a dozen people." She says that with an unnerving finality, as if those workers were executed. "The rest of us are going to work extra hours, for the same pay, until we don't notice they're gone."

Torn from the pad and laid out in chronological order, the New System's instructions cover our entire dining-room table.

And that's just my version.

I use my weekend to commit every rule and recommendation to memory. It doesn't take much scholarship for me to notice differences between my notes and my wife's. Sometimes it's a matter of which rule comes first. Other differences probably stem from our mutual sloppiness. And still other variations are understandable, in a fashion.

"Talk to your father once a week," I was told.

While my wife's father is dead, and unmentioned.

"Talk to your mother daily," she has. She underlined it for emphasis. But I've never been close to my mother, which is why once a week is considered good enough.

I'm thinking that whoever drew up these lists, they were thorough. A career bureaucrat can't help but feel impressed by the job.

Yet beneath that thoroughness is an idiocy. By Saturday night, I'm talking to myself, a shrill voice asking, "How does this make sense?"

My wife is sitting in the living room, in her recliner, struggling with her college copy of *Moby Dick*. (Read more good literature, as well as the fun stuff.) "What do you mean? How does what make sense, Donald?"

"We're supposed to start gardening next spring," I tell her, my voice edging close to a complaining tone.

She says, "Good."

"And we've got to master a second language."

Again, "Good."

"I'm supposed to learn how to cook—"

"Excellent!"

"While you're going to master simple plumbing and wiring."

She hesitates, then says, "I intend to," with a voice that needs a little more backbone. Then she takes a deep breath and asks, "So what's wrong with any of that?"

"Is there time?"

I ask it, then confess my doubts. "I don't think we'll have enough days to read about whales *and* learn Spanish *and* keep up with our daily walks, too."

My wife stares at me. I know that look, only the eyes have a sharpness that I've never seen before. "My head's working better than ever," she tells me, point-blank. "Which is because of the New System, isn't it?"

"Neurochemical impulses will be quicker," my list promises.

"Learning will be fun," says hers.

I read both of them aloud, then ask, "Why those differences?"

"Why ask why?" is her reply.

Yesterday morning, I wouldn't have. I had a job and

security, and I was enthralled by this strange revolution.

Even now, I can't find words for my questions.

"If God tells you to do something," my wife maintains, "then you can do it. That's just a given, mister."

I say, "Maybe."

After a few minutes, I mutter, "You're right."

She returns to the battered paperback, turning its yellowed pages with a genuine discipline. And I continue sitting at the dining room table, wondering if I'm genuinely smarter than I was just last week. Or is it that the sceptical parts of my brain have simply been shifted to new, more productive jobs?

My wife dresses up and drives off to church.

I won't.

"A spirit finds nourishment in all places," both lists offer.

I'm still hunched over our lists, trying to make them part of me, and I hear the mailbox open and close. On a Sunday morning. My first thought is that the post office is working seven days a week now. But the single letter has no stamp, no address. It's just my name on the envelope, in that familiar simple print, and inside, on ordinary paper, is a new instruction:

"Dogs need to be on their leashes at all times. At all times!"

"Good idea," I whisper to myself.

Then a better idea comes to me, without warning.

I promise to invest Monday looking for my new career. Under the guise of preparing my resumé, I drive down to Kinko's and rent time on a computer. That next morning, I rise early and take a little stroll up the street. Unnoticed, I hope. Then it's back home to brew coffee and burn oatmeal, feeding both of us before I kiss my wife and send her off to work.

To pass time, I watch television.

The news is remarkably dull. No direct mention is made of the New System, yet everything that I see and hear stems from it. Corporations are retooling. Governments around the world are quietly dissolving, allowing fresh faces and minor parties to step into power. No little wars seem to be burning. If there's famine, I can't see it from my living room. What I do see are inexperienced newscasters, young and plain-faced, earnestly struggling with their new jobs. It makes me wonder what happened to the old faces. Where are the trusted, well-seasoned pros who look at the world with a tenacious cynicism?

By ten o'clock, I'm bored.

I switch to a rerun of *The Rockford Files*. I haven't seen this episode before. James Garner and the police are working together in harmony, trying to bring down a bunch of hoods in bad suits.

It's a quarter after when the doorbell rings.

Gloria rings once, then again. I take a few breaths and comb my hair. Then the bell rings a third time, and I open the door, smiling brilliantly, using her first name with a false surprise and an easy fondness.

We've never spoken about anything more weighty than the weather and how nice our respective lawns look. Yet she returns my fondness with her own. She says, "Donald," and I correct her. Then she smiles and says, "Donnie," and reaches into her back pocket. I notice that she's wearing makeup and attractive, casual

clothes. She's pretty, always. Maybe not quite as pretty as I remembered, or as young. But she has a youthful leanness, and her jeans fit snugly against her firm ass. When she pulls the letter out of her back pocket, I feel my breath stop, and when she unfolds it, my rubbery little heart stops, too.

"I found this," she whispers. "In my mail box."

I swallow, then croak the words, "What is it?"

She shows me.

Written in that familiar type is a simple statement. "The man who truly loves you lives three houses to the east and across the street."

I pretend to read it for the first time. Then I glance up, and nod, and sigh with an admirer's warm hopefulness.

"My husband," she says.

The memory of a large man in a suit leaps at me.

"He promised the stockholders to work 18-hour days until the profits double." She says it with a low-grade anger, then asks, "What are you thinking?"

I tell her, "You're a lovely woman, Gloria."

"Am I?"

I don't say anything else. I just go to her and pull her against me, everything so easy and fun that I find myself wanting to giggle.

Her firm little ass comes right out of those jeans.

We do it on the dining room table, Gloria stretched out across the yellow papers. Then after I'm finished, and she's finished, she looks up at me and smiles. And she tells me, flat out, "I was wondering something. Where did you print up that note?"

My wife arrives back home just before eleven that night, catching me parked in front of the television.

"Any news?" she asks.

"Nothing special," I offer. "What about you?"

She doesn't want to be sidetracked. "Have you found a job yet?"

Screwing our neighbour, which is good spiritual work. But instead of speaking my mind, I find a different honesty.

"I haven't even looked," I confess.

She regards me with a cool contempt. Then she says, "Brent warned me. He thought you'd take this attitude."

"Who's Brent?" I say. "That jerk in the next cubicle?"

"He's my boss now," she informs me. And with her narrowing eyes and the smug puckering of her mouth, I realize that he's more than her superior. I know my wife. Judging by the signs, I can tell that she's taken a lover.

Good, I think.

For many reasons, I grab her hand, squeezing it as I tell her, "Tomorrow."

"You'll look?"

"Tomorrow."

After Tuesday's carnal fun, Gloria and I decide to take a slow, non-aerobic stroll through the neighbourhood. It's a chilly, bright day. Away from our street, we hold hands, and I talk about nothing in particular, and in the middle of that nothing, she looks past with a grim expression, then asks, "Who came up with this new system?"

"Aliens."

I say it instantly, without doubts.

"You mean extraterrestrials?"

"Advanced and very powerful. That's what I think." Three aliens came to my doorstep, and hers, wearing human disguises. "They came to help us. To improve our lives. It's just very difficult for them."

"Difficult how?"

I make a vague gesture, implying that the problems are obvious.

Gloria nods, accepting nothing. I can see her thinking hard about everything, tipping her head back as she looks at the sky.

All at once I realize that I know nothing about my lover. With a circumspection, I ask, "What kind of consultant are you?"

"Was I," she corrects. Then she says, "I was a systems analyst. I told companies how to do things faster and better. But now everyone has that talent, or they think they do. And my work has dried up."

"I know that feeling," I offer.

She says, "Aliens, huh?"

"Unless it's God," I allow. As a joke.

She gives a big snort, then tells me, "Did you know? Every major science lab has been closed down. Worldwide."

I hadn't heard it. "What's that mean?"

"I don't know."

But I have the impression that she knows, or she at least has ideas that are too strange or too potent to be said aloud.

Our lovely warm autumn abandons us on Thursday. Rain turns to a wet, wet snow that tumbles out of a perfectly still sky, covering my shaggy lawn and every tree branch for hundreds of miles. My wife calls home at nine in the evening to say that she's trapped at work. But when I call her right back, nothing but her voice mail is on duty. Alone, I watch the trees outside bowing under the weight of nearly a foot of snow. It's the most peaceful and silent storm that I can remember. Alone, I climb into bed, and when I wake up early in the morning, before dawn, I realize that the power is out, and the furnace with it, and I'm lying under the covers, almost cold, and I hear the sudden *crack* of splintering wood, followed by the majestic crash of a nearby tree.

Twenty-one inches of sopping wet snow has fallen, catching the leaves still on their branches.

The city is devastated, quite simply.

I dress in my warmest clothes and march outside. Ashes and maples and beautiful old sycamores lie strewn over the streets. Telephone poles stand at dangerous angles. Insulated wires wait to electrocute the unwary. Up the street, looking exceptionally handsome and exceptionally pissed, is Gloria's husband. He holds a chainsaw in both hands, looking for his first target. I'm certain that he knows about his wife and me, and he intends to slice my adulterous body into so much hamburger. But instead of that, he shakes his head and says, "Fucking weather." He looks through me, asking, "Weren't we were promised better weather? Wasn't that part of the deal?"

My day is spent helping neighbours struggle with their toppled trees.

At first, there's optimism to spare. We plan to clear the streets all the way to the main streets, making it possible

to drive. Adults wear silly smiles and make canned speeches about perseverance against the elements. Children pretend this is a game. But as backs give out and clothes become sopping wet, and as we learn more about the disaster's scope, the smiles and speeches evaporate into a kind of weary, grumbling hopelessness.

Ten states have been crippled by the snowfall. Washington has declared the region a disaster. Yet according to one of the few remaining radio stations, even with the Federal government's full resources, it'll be deep into December before power is restored to every house and business.

That's more than a month away.

By mid-afternoon, a rumour finds its way to us. The New System is about to make all the repairs, and there's nothing to worry about. Nothing. Some people believe the rumour completely, and they return to their chilly homes to wait. Others allow themselves to feel buoyed up by the promise, but we continue working with dulled saws and tired winches and 4x4 trucks, dragging the easiest of the mess out of the way.

By dusk, I'm so tired that I want to weep.

I'm staggering toward home, legs made of lead and my wet flesh dangerously cold, and that's when I notice the figure coming towards me. Bundled up, the person has no identity. It's my wife, I guess. But no, she's too small. Then I realize this person could be coming from the Bestons', and maybe it's Gloria. Maybe she's left her husband and has come out into the wilderness to find me. But then the facemask is off, and I'm staring at my one-time supervisor. He looks as tired as I feel, panting after who knows how many miles of hard walking. But he has something important to say. "Donnie," he gasps. "This is what we've been waiting for." Then he breathes deeply before adding, "I'm sure if we plead our case, under these circumstances, we can get our jobs back. What do you think?"

I feed my supervisor vague words and some very hot chocolate made on my gas stove, then I send him away and drop into bed.

Outside, it falls below zero.

By morning, it's cold enough indoors that I can see my breath.

But the wind blows from the south, and the bright sun starts working on the snow. By afternoon, the climate is verging on hot and two feet of water-fat snow has been transformed to slush and serious flooding. Our streets are still blocked by the fallen trees. But it doesn't look as if any of my neighbours are working outside. A sense of gloom is palpable – is reasonable. I occupy my time writing an angry letter to the editor, listing mistakes as well as criticizing the entire philosophy. Then I put it in an envelope and apply stamps, and in lieu of a real address, I write:

"To the New System."

Stuck in the mailbox, waiting for me, is a small, handwritten note.

"Donnie," I read. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this way, but I can't see you again. John and I have decided to rededicate ourselves to each other. When the weather clears, we'll move to our acreage in the country. I hope you understand, and I hope you aren't too hurt."

"All the best,

"Gloria Beston."

"PS. Prepare for the worst, dear. Because it's coming."

That next day, unexpectedly, my wife returns.

She must have walked all the way home. She's wearing the clothes that she wore to work, and they look filthy. Her face is soaked. Partly from crying, but mostly from simple sweat. It must be a hundred degrees outdoors, and that despite a dense white haze that hides all but the house directly across the street.

My wife won't look at me.

"Don't ask," she warns. "I don't want to talk about it."

Brent got tired of her, I'm thinking. And I'm surprised how good that feels.

A crying jag begins, and I use that moment to slip out onto the porch and lift the mailbox lid. My letter is still there. I fold it in half and put it into the kitchen trash, then I watch my wife's misery until I've had enough. I usher her into the basement, where it's cooler. "We don't have running water," I explain. "But both bathtubs are filled, and there's plenty of warm pop. Do you want anything?"

She shakes her head, then sobs.

"Are you hungry?"

She isn't.

I try both radios for the umpteenth time today, but either their batteries are running down, or no one is broadcasting any more.

I'm fiddling with the dials, trying to ignore my despair, when I hear the clear, strong chiming of our doorbell.

"Would you get that?" says my wife. "I look too much like hell."

Our power is still out – I check the lights on the way upstairs – but our doorbell finds the juice to work a second time.

He's waiting on the porch, almost exactly where he was standing when I first saw him. But the face isn't a boy's face. When I look at it carefully, I can see whiskers. I can see that the boyishness comes from a feminine softness. And I notice that the eyes are different colours, and they seem to change colour from blink to blink.

"May we come inside?" he asks with a soft, unmemorable voice.

I push open the screen door.

"Thank you." He sits on my sofa and smiles at me, something about his expression unsettling. Like a boy who has done something enormously wrong.

"Are you God?" I ask. Straight away.

"We wish," he mutters. Then laughs, sadly.

"Okay. Are you some kind of alien?"

"Hardly, Donnie." Blue eyes turn emerald green, then a blackish brown. "We're people. A team of physicists and other researchers from Los Alamos. What you see is a compilation of every member of our team."

I sit across from him, and wait.

"We were working on the structure of matter and energy when we found out. The universe is an elaborate programme. Which wasn't exactly a big surprise, of course. It's an old speculation. But once you know the tricks, it's amazing how it easy it is to get into the programme and start making changes."

I have to ask, "Why did you?"

"We didn't have a choice, we felt. If we could make this discovery, then others – others with less moral backbone and responsibility – could do it, too. And where would that lead?"

"You're right," I mutter. "There could have been real trouble."

My guest, or guests, try to ignore the implication. The head shakes and that smooth, blended voice tells me, "We need help. That much is obvious."

I say, "Shit."

"We want to hire you, Donnie. And perhaps another hundred thousand people with your talents." The little shoulders shrug, then my guests tell me, "Bureaucrats have skills that PhDs don't. That's one of the lessons we've learned."

"Put things back," I tell them. "Back the way they were. That's my advice."

"If only we could." Again, the face belongs to a shameful boy who knows that he's done something very wrong. "Believe us, Donnie. We've tried that many times."

"Did you read my letter?" I ask them.

"And your mind. And your soul. And your work at Transportation." They pause, then tell me, "We would love to have your help."

"To put things back where they belong," I say.

"Except we can't," they repeat. But then they add, "Wouldn't you like a role in building the Newer System?"

The obvious occurs to me. "If you can read my soul, then why do you need to ask me for a 'yes' or 'no'?"

For a slippery instant, the little face is startled.

Then I tell my guests, "Just a minute. Could you wait here?"

"Of course, Donnie."

I go downstairs, shutting the kitchen door behind me. My wife sits on the cool grey concrete, sobbing quietly. I watch her for a moment, then she lifts her head and asks, "Who was it?"

I kneel beside her, saying nothing.

"What did they want?"

I start to unbutton her shirt, discovering that her bra is missing. "What you need first is a bath." I help her to her feet and steer her toward the basement bath. "Come on," I whisper. "Come on."

"But we don't have water," she replies. "You said."

"There's enough to get you clean," I promise.

My wife shudders with the first touch of the wet wash cloth. Then both of us hear the creaking of floorboards as someone moves upstairs.

"Who is that?" she asks.

I say nothing.

The kitchen door opens, and small feet come downstairs.

I rinse the cloth and apply soap to the edges of an ugly purple bruise. Then my wife tries to cover herself, saying, "Someone's watching us."

"Darling," I tell her, "that's what I'm counting on."

Robert Reed is a rising star of American sf who we are pleased to welcome to *Interzone* for the first time. Born in 1956, he is the author of such novels as *Beyond the Veil of Stars* (1994), *An Exaltation of Larks* (1995) and *Beneath the Gated Sky* (1997). Many of his stories have appeared in *Asimov's SF* and in the year's-best anthologies edited by Gardner Dozois. He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.

MUTANT POPCORN...MUTANT



I had the dildocam spam this morning. You may well have had it too: "Do you like to watch? Exclusive hidden camera feeds direct from college universities! TOILET-CAM – Hidden inside the bowl – looking up! SHOWER-CAM – Wet & soapy shower scenes! BEDROOM-CAM – Frat House scam rooms! DRESS-CAM – Shopping mall changing rooms! GYNO-CAM – Doctors office exam room! *Click here to see!*" (Sorry, feature disabled in this IZ mirror.) Nothing as such about any actual dildo-cam, a technology that presumably remains subscriber-only; but it's nevertheless an invigorating reminder of the superior satirical inventiveness of the real future over anything we might have seen on *The Truman Show*. You may think you're safe while you're reading this in the stall, but who's to say your intimate moment isn't already being webcammed live from below to an

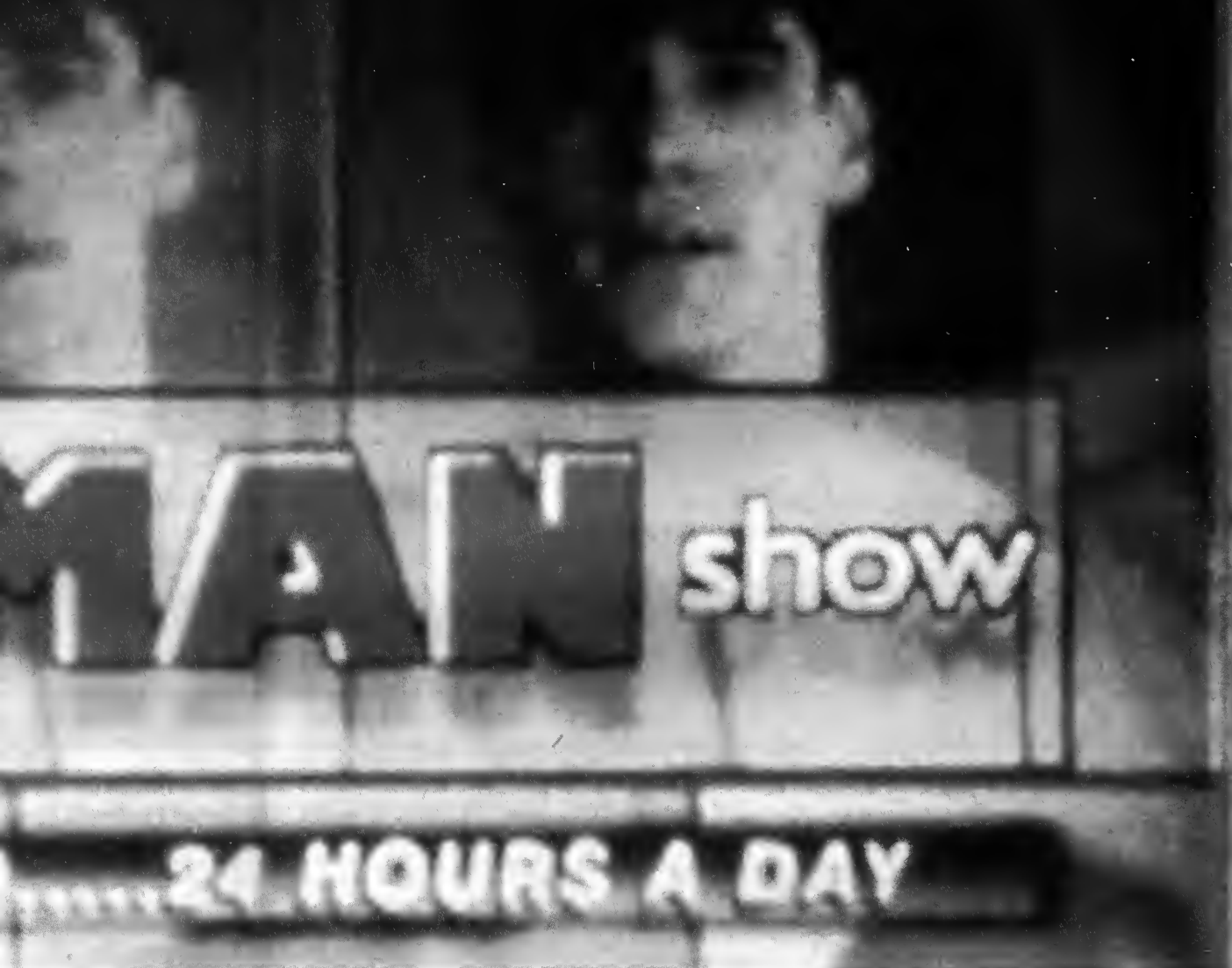
Nick Lowe

audience of tens of millions worldwide? Who knows whether, in the future, everyone will check their surroundings for hidden cameras the way *Truman*-watchers do in coverage cuts? – not for solipsistic fear of trillion-dollar conspiracies of voyeurism overseen by demiurgic auteurs who nevertheless cut tastefully away from the frisky bits, but because the power to spectate is even now escaping the stranglehold of the professionals, like moviemakers and TV directors, who have traditionally controlled it.

Cutting-edge it may seem, but in a number of key ways *The Truman Show* is already a deeply nostalgic movie. For all its supposedly daring dismantlement of the directorial and spectatorial process, it rests on a pro-

foundly suspect, but tellingly under-constructed, opposition between film (artistic, intelligent, responsible, benign) and television (populist, dumbed-down, invasive, sinister). It's hard to be dispassionate, of course, because *The Truman Show* took so long to arrive here that you had to be raised in a bubble to be able to watch its revelations – which I shan't discuss here, though everyone knows them – with the Truman-like innocence they optimistically assume. Early reviews carried banners like "Warning! Plot Revealed!"; by the time it reached the UK, the show was already over, like watching terrestrial reruns that all your mates saw months ago on satellite. And this in itself is part of the problem: if there's one negotiation that Peter Weir's film fails to make, it's that films themselves are objects of a larger spectacle. A novel of conceptual breakthrough can keep its secret

POPCORN...MUTANT POPCORN...



much longer than a movie, which is such an object of worldwide scrutiny in itself that none of its necessary secrets can be as private as they need to be – so that watching *Truman* now is already like seeing *The Crying Game*, *The Vanishing* or *The Usual Suspects* after your hitherto best friend has given the trick away.

And this isn't just a matter of narrative proprieties. For better or worse, the verdict of contemporary classic was already in long before the evidence was shown to the public here; and while nobody would wish to diminish Weir's achievement in turning a yellowing spec script (by *Gattaca*'s Kiwi maverick Andrew Niccol) into a resonant, richly-layered movie of ideas that actually pulled in punters, it does leave you wondering whether any of the jurors had ever actually read a Philip Dick novel. *Time Out of Joint*, the ultimate *Truman* prototype, has been with us now for 40

years; and though there's no disputing the artful timeliness of *Truman*'s scopophilic media variation on the theme, what may seem like a fresh and challenging work of imagination to those reared in the constricted bubbleverse of mainstream cinema is for most sf readers just as soothingly old-fashioned in its way as *Star Wars*. The pleasure of *The Truman Show* isn't really all that different: seeing at last on the breathtaking big screen what we spent our adolescence having to dream for ourselves.

It's always fascinating to see major sf concepts breaking through, usually decades late, into popular imagination, and this is certainly the most effective repackaging yet of Dick's core ideas – more so, it has to be conceded, than any of the movies that credit Dick himself – but by real-thing standards *Truman* is pretty tame stuff, especially in its ending. Despite many interviews, Weir has been

guarded about influences – perhaps, it's now turning out, for shrewd legal reasons – and it's not actually clear how much, if any, PKD he and Niccol (whose original character and setting were considerably darker and, from the sound, more Dick-like) have themselves read. Certainly the *Prisoner* echoes, so blatant to genre viewers, may well be coincidental, a convergence of Niccol's original escape-from-Manhattan plot and Weir's rival fascination with his own Portmeirion USA, the picket-fence designed community of Seaville, Fla. But for a film that otherwise is so aware of its range of resonance, it's a shame and a paradox that it capitulates to the contours of feelgood movie plotting in a way that its prototype wouldn't.

These niggles aside, though it's undeniably a risktaking project for big-star cinema: a hundred-minute tightrope ride over an abyss into which precariously-suspended disbe-

lief could tumble in an instant and vanish down any one of the bottomless logic holes, and tolerance of its relentless self-conscious significance could collapse if momentum falters even for a moment. Casting Jim Carrey was an enormous gamble that only just pays off: his Dick Sargent looks are perfect for the part, but Weir has had his work cut out to paper over the human cracks in a performer who doesn't so much act in the normal sense as go into spasm, and he's had to make more of Truman's lifelong conditioning to overact than is entirely comfortable for empathy and identification. It's a tribute to Weir's extraordinary skill that it all holds together, just, and it's a joy to see Oz's finest movie expat return in triumph to his genre roots two decades after *The Last Wave* (the back-catalogue opus that Truman most recalls). As ever, his sense of music is wonderful, he directs his actors brilliantly (Laura Linney, especially, is magnificent), and there are displays of dazzling technical craft (the eyes-across-the-dancefloor scene with Natasha McElhone is sheer bravura). By Hollywood standards, it's radical stuff brilliantly executed; as sf, it's already history.

No less nostalgic in its gratification is the season's other concept movie, the little Canadian indie hit *Cube*: a geometrically pure essay in low-budget movie minimalism, stretching seven shaky actors and a single cramped set into an exhilarating string of pointedly pointless set pieces. Oddly hailed as a movie of

ideas, *Cube*'s achievement is really quite the reverse: a hermetic narrative from which all significance has been abstracted and whose only remaining content is itself. The plot, about a group of ordinary people who wake up in a mysterious and lethally-boobytrapped 27 x 27 x 27 cube of 14' cubicles, is constructed entirely out of puzzles; situation and setting have the abstract cleanness of an ASCII adventure game, with characters of comparable depth. The cast is hand-picked for functionality ("I'm a cop," "I'm a doctor," &c.), with motivation coming a poor second ("What's *your* purpose, Quentin?" "Kids, three of them. I haven't made my peace yet. The rest of you find what strength you can..."); and in the best tradition of pulp sf characterization the acting and dialogue run the gamut from so-so to terrible.

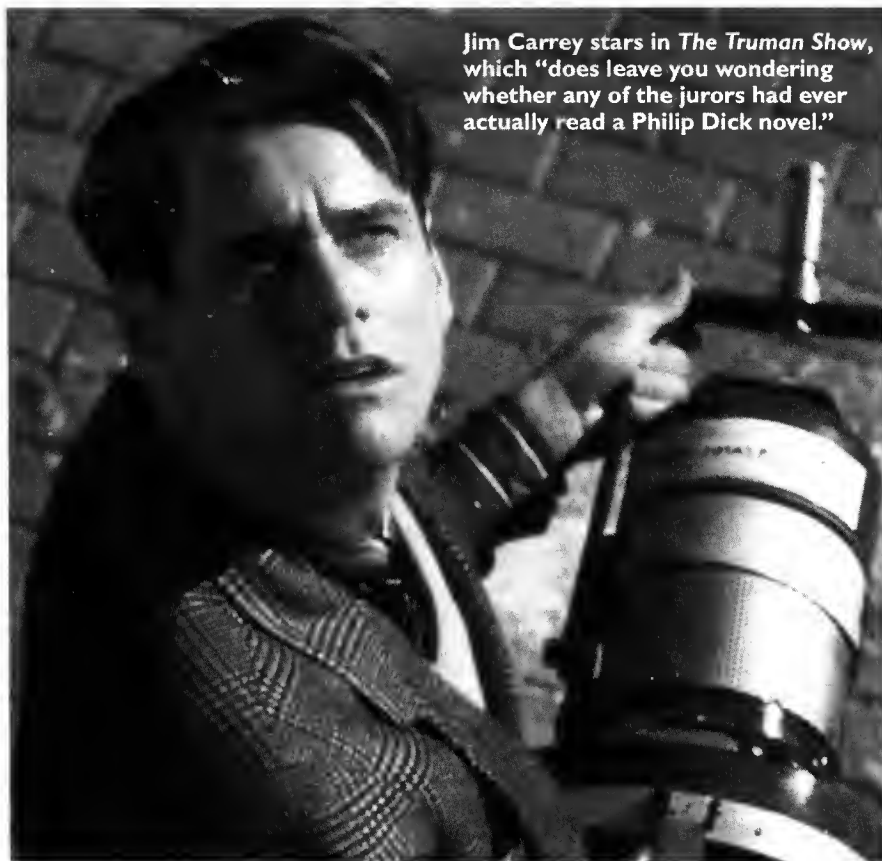
Cube's weakest moments, in fact, are those where the characters try to come to life and the plot develops delusions of significance: in particular, the longeurs where everyone gets heated about cockup-vs-conspiracy theories of why they're having to go through all this. ("It's a headless blunder masquerading under the illusion of a master plan!") Since we all know perfectly well that it would be a suicidal letdown for any answer to be offered within the film, collapsing the wave-function of resonant possibilities to a single disappointing reality, and that the true reason for the *Cube* is simply that it's a great little setup for a movie, it seems meretricious to speculate about the motives or otherwise of a demiurgic Christof out there

behind the lens. If this were the 1960s *Galaxy* short it largely evokes, we might reasonably expect the mathematical brainteasers to be presented a little more frontally to the audience so we can all join in; but it's otherwise an authentic realization of a kind of old-fashioned puzzle sf that shouldn't feel any need to excuse itself to anyone.

Refreshingly, *Deep Rising* at least has no such embarrassing aspirations to thoughtfulness. Ecstatically daft, this throwback to the deepwater monster movies of a decade ago offers the near-surreal premise of a vast floating Arthur Hailey novel overrun, for no evident reason, by people-eating giant killer-worms from below the deep. You're just settling into Irwin Allen nostalgia mode, with a multi-stranded plot about a titanic pleasure cruiser stuffed with billionaires on its maiden voyage through the South China Seas, with the obligatory high-class lady pickpocket, ruthless gang of stop-at-nothing international hijackers, and mystery traitor on the inside, when an altogether different kind of movie shows up real fast on the radar and starts to pop up through the toilet bowls. ("They hide in burrows and catch their victims with spiny tentacles, and then they eat you!")

A concept so high you wonder if you dreamed it, this marries *Titanic* with *Tremors* in a kind of *Beneath the Poseidon Adventure* set in a low-budget Canadian version of that all-star disaster movie world in which nobody looks like a real person and everyone looks like a famous actor. There's a lookalike Sandra Bullock (the rather appealing Famke Janssen), a lookalike Nick Nolte (Anthony Heald), and a lookalike Treat Williams, who in a deft twist turns out to be Treat Williams. ("I heard of you," says an expendable in awe, "but I figured you'd be older...") Production values are unaccountably high, with a wondrously dreadful POOM-poom POOM-poom Jerry Goldsmith score that seems to be recycled entirely from out-takes of *Jaws*, and some rather CG-looking CG effects from Rob Bottin, Dream Quest and ILM, with a separate unit credited for "Half-Digested Billy." As a final Daliesque flourish, the print I saw came to the end of the credits and then did them all over again in Spanish; but by then all other witnesses had left the auditorium, so I suppose nobody will ever believe me. Riotously stupid and entertaining right to the final idiotic twist, it's one of those films whose existence is harder to account for than any thoughtful, risk-taking maverick production. You never know what's just around the U-bend.

Nick Lowe



Jim Carrey stars in *The Truman Show*, which "does leave you wondering whether any of the jurors had ever actually read a Philip Dick novel."

So which would you rather be, clever or rich?

The correct answer, obviously, is “both” (or, for extra credit, “both, plus healthy, happy and devastatingly sexually attractive as well”) but, if you really could only have one, I had always gone for clever, on the assumption that if you’re smart you can always bag some loot somehow, if you want to enough. Experience teaches us, however, that even if you have a Mensa-sized IQ that doesn’t stop you spending your life hovering five quid away from your overdraft limit, whereas – until they’re first up against the wall when the revolution comes – there will never be a shortage of rich bastards without two brain cells to rub together.

Look, it’s a metaphor, OK? We’re talking television here, do *try* and keep up.

What I’m saying is, would you rather watch programmes that have been larded with money or spiced with wit? And I’m suggesting that, while I used to think the brains have it every time, I may have been wrong.

Where TV science fiction is concerned, the fault line between clever and rich has always been drawn just about where the Atlantic is, between the poor but clever Brits with our *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, *Doctor Who* and *Blake’s 7* culture of cardboard sets, gravel-pit settings and smart-alecky scripts, and the rich but conventional Yanks with their *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and *X-Files*, the BIGGG-money franchises that keep swirling round the schedules in syndication till kingdom come.

But where does that leave the odds and ends of British sf that have been popping up this year; the *Invasion: Earths* and the *Vanishing Mans* and the *Ultraviolets*, the money shows with no staying-power, the British attempts to Do Yank. Well, let’s see.

Let’s start back at *Invasion: Earth*. Maybe I was so surprised to see something with British sensibilities and American production values that I over-rated it a bit at first viewing. But I don’t think so. I’ve looked back at what I wrote about it at the time and I stand by my opinion. The show was good stuff. Maybe not world-changing, cutting-edge, change-the-paradigm stuff, but good solid sf polished with enough money to make it look like a proper programme for a change. *Vanishing Man* (which came and went on ITV earlier in the year) tried to go further, to pull off the Ben Elton trick of writing sf but selling it as mainstream. Neil Morissey, playing on his everyman stature acquired from the “soft lads” comedy *Men Behaving Badly*, played another comic everyman who – I can hardly bear to write it – became invisible

Tube Corn

Wendy Bradley

when wet. Yes, I know, having someone invisible when wet makes for a deeply stupid plot, but, again, it was a series that was very British in content but, because of its production values, very mainstream – and so very American – in feel.

And now *Ultraviolet*. Oh, come on; one is a surprise, two is a coincidence but three is a phenomenon, a trend.

Ultraviolet was a programme about vampires that never used the

word “vampire.” I boggled at the first episode when our renegade cop hero discovered that the action men were armed with carbon-tipped bullets – a hi-tech version of the stake through the heart – and garlic grenades, and immediately leapt from that to the truth without having to go through that incredulous “so, what you’re *really* saying is that my ex-partner has been co-opted by vampires and is now a member of the undead?” scene that’s always so hard to pull off. Great stuff. At first sight. Get rid of the clichés, make a vampire show without the camp of the old Hammer horrors, or the goth and S&M of Anne Rice and her ilk.

But, hang on a minute, then what’s the point? Isn’t making a vampire show without camp, goth or S&M a bit like producing *Romeo and Juliet* without any of that star-cross’d lovers stuff, or doing Hamlet without the prince?

Calling them “leeches” didn’t help: without all the stuff that makes vampires vampires, they might as well have *been* leeches. In fact, once you got over the audacity of the concept, *Ultraviolet* was a bit, well, dull actually. Oh, it had all the ingredients, of course. Start off with an unaccountable organization that can stomp about doing whatever it wants. This one, forsooth, was funded by the Vatican! Yet they could still snatch people off the street (including an entire school full of children at one point) and snarl “I can get you disbarred with one phone call” at inconveniently ethical medics. Don’t you just long for the snarlee to raise a sardonic eyebrow and go “oooh, get you ducky!” Well, I ask you, they



FRAME

by

FRAME

Nicholas Waller

The vampire devil smashed the doors apart. Steve was scared but stood firm, watching as it dropped and sniffed the swirling dusty moonlit air... He tried to remember its perfectly delineated bristling fur and every tiny muscle twitch... He tried to write a note, but the letters squeezed from his hand. He tried to click but nothing happened.

The beast was alive, part of a complete world Steve could sense beyond; and, as its eyes locked with his, specular glints subtly shifted and the gnarled lips curled baring drooling sharp teeth, and –

Steve Davidson woke and found himself looking up at silhouetted polygons that only slowly resolved themselves: a cone-shaped lamp, a desk, and a moulded-foam vampire head wearing dark glasses and a hat.

He sat up. He was on a sleeping bag in his office at the studio. Storyboards and reference photos covered the walls, books, memos and wildlife videos swamped the desk; his SGI workstation loomed from the mess like an iceberg in the night. Or day. It was hard to tell. Like most workspaces in Silver Egg Digital FX, Steve's office was shuttered against the Californian sunlight so he could see the colours on his screen better.

Too late, he remembered his dream beast; it slipped away as he reached for it, leaving only the impression of a perfect memory.

8.13 am. Damn. At around six he'd taken a short break to rest his eyes; he wasn't supposed to fall asleep. Not this week. Now there wasn't much time to get the latest iteration of his vampire animation out for dailies.

He sat down at the computer, pushing the gluey remains of a Pad Thai aside.

The animation character – deep torso, lanky long arms and knobbly knees – stood flat on the screen, waiting. When finally rendered with hundreds of megabytes of texture maps he would be big and hairy, but right now he was a stripped-down wireframe model and ready to roll. Alerted by a noise, he had to jump up, bound down a slope over fallen statues and boulders as the camera moved to follow, and end up in a face-off with a live action human hero standing knee-deep in the river below. Cut.

Steve made the perspective window full screen, substituted a high polygon model and ran a preview. The beast looked up; head a little snappy. He looked round. Stiff. Then he just popped off the ground like a light frog and scampered inelegantly down the obstacle course, his legs alternately boneless and wooden.

It looked terrible. All 219 frames plus handles. There was little sense of real muscle and sinew articulating the joints, transporting a 500-pound creature through a gravity field. There was no weight, no mass.

And of course there were no real muscles, just a hierarchically linked collection of polygons and NURBS patches, foot bone mouse-click connected to the shinbone in inverse kinematic chains, bouncing down a jumble of 3D-modelled virtual set objects with all the zing of a toy pulled over scattered play bricks by a two-year-old.

If only he could talk to the character. Look scary! OK, now growl and please use your legs more believably...

"You useless piece of trash!" said Steve.

It was going to be embarrassing to present, especially since Drissa Yilla was just rocking with his multi-vampire fight animations.

Why couldn't he?

The location was good, an Atlantean temple on a sunlit hillside. The complex live geometry had been measured by laser, rebuilt accurately in 3D and the two match-moved with no problems.

The creature looked believable enough. Sculpted by art director Todd Rankin, the digitized result was the basis of four computer models ranging from simple and speedy for blocking to a maxi-megabyte deal with hundreds of controls to manage all the variables needed to create a functioning character. Once Steve's animation was approved, the technical directors would colour and light and shade it, adding dust and other interactive elements to enhance the illusion that Old Vampy was integrated with the location plate.

But so far his animation had neither the solidity nor the spark that made it look alive and no amount of TD trickery would fix that. Somebody had to fix it, though, because *Vampire: Born of Atlantis!* was a movie largely about these beasts of love and blood; if the creature didn't work, neither would the story and SED/FX would

fail in helping the director realize his artistic vision.

"Stupid vampire!" he yelled. "Act!"

He stood up in frustration. If you don't know what to do next, get coffee.

Windowless but fluorescing, the kitchen was an oasis in the dimmed corridors of the studio. As Steve stood blinking in the light, the hiss of the coffee machine became a stream he could almost see bubbling through a dappled glade –

"Hi, Steve, how's it going?"

"Mmm?" said Steve, turning. "Todd. I can't nail GT144_3." Todd would understand; he'd done the FX storyboards, laying out key frames on paper, so he knew as well as anyone what the director wanted to see.

Todd scrutinized Steve's face. "Another all-nighter?"

"My vampire looks like a paper cutout," said Steve. And Todd had a real feel for mass and tonal values; what's more he'd managed to suggest a sinister, hooded look to the vampire's eyes that no one had been able to recapture in the computer model. In pencil! "Really," said Steve, "even your scratty little boards are better!"

"Well, thanks. What's the problem?"

"Hmm? Everything. Articulation, translation through space, its path... No sense of mass, of presence."

"Your wildlife refs don't help?"

"They only tell me a low-rez video of a wolf looks more real than anything I've ever done." It was true. How could a mangy animal with no training in 3D modelling make his own limited collection of TV-resolution pixels look alive?

"Have you acted the shot yourself?"

"C'mon Todd! No!"

Todd poured his coffee. "We shouldn't have let the performance classes go."

Steve had to smile at the thought: adults twirling around the local high school gym, trying to become more involved animators by imagining themselves as cats and elephants instead of simply prodding at their wireframes with digital sticks. "I never liked that. Acting like an octopus..."

"I'm serious," said Todd. "And when was the last time you went to a zoo, saw some big real animals up close?"

"Well, what about your life classes, while you're on the case?"

"Them too."

Steve laughed; Todd just wasn't living in the real world. "We're on a deadline. Lucy Hatter's not going to let us all sit around drawing naked girls, getting in touch with our inner animals!"

"Everybody needs to see live subjects. Sketch the muscle groups, know their weight." Todd smiled. "Feel their pain."

Steve shook his head. "What we need right now are more intelligent software tools." He checked his watch. "Sorry, but I got a shot to get out."

"Show me."

"Well, OK," said Steve, reluctantly. He got to his knees to mime the action. "Vampy's chomping a blonde priestess. Splash! he hears. Whuh!? he says. Human!! And he springs up... and..."

Steve just squatted there.

"How do you *feel* what happens next?"

"He jumps down. I won't do it, because I'll break my

wrists."

"OK." Todd thought a moment. "I imagine him leaning out into space, heavy, swinging his arms forward like a swim racer diving into a pool. Purposeful. And not afraid of breaking his wrists."

Steve shut his eyes. Was that right? "I want him to be your worst nightmare, right in your face. We have to see him. Super-detailed."

"Really? Don't show the monster! they used to say."

Steve stood up. "That's because they couldn't do what we can."

"Well—" Todd was interrupted by a page echoing from a hundred phones: "Heads of Departments meeting in the conference room."

"Gotta go," he said. "I'm going to raise this. The classes and field trips."

Steve nodded and followed him out, forgetting his own coffee.

The building was filling up. The technical directors would be at their workstations already, checking the overnight renders. More people were coming in through the daylight reception area, all looking enviably solid after a night in their own beds and a breakfast in their stomachs, trailing wispy ribbons of sunstuff behind them. Steve felt stretched and light-headed by comparison. Floating.

He blinked. Also in reception was a brooding vampire.

It was just an animatronic puppet, the augmented man-in-a-scary-suit used on set; at first it had given people quite a shock, but now they hardly saw it at all.

"Steve!"

It came from the dark video room; Steve saw two shapes silhouetted against flickering monitors.

"Helen?"

"Erika's about to run my comp!"

"Well, I –"

"C'mon, its OS1_1 – the Opening Shot!"

"OK, OK." He wasn't going to fix his problem in the next five minutes anyway.

Erika fired up the clip. It opened as a digital 2D painting with a fade up to a new moon. 3D particle system clouds whipped in front and the virtual camera tilted down, through lightning-studded murk, to reveal a sea horizon and the red-tiled rooftops of distant Atlantean city suburbs, painted out of digitized large-format stills of Greek villages and animated by adding rippling flags, seagulls and waves breaking on the shore.

Middle-distance temples and other buildings were digital models built by SED/FX artists to a plan by Todd Rankin, 3D painted and bump-mapped for texture, lit to match and comped into the storm; lightning modelled the virtual structures while a foreground practical rainwater element shot against black started crashing out of the sky.

"OK, now look at this," said Helen.

The shot segued into a motion-control move that descended round a stage dragon statue splashing with rain, before wiping off a roof edge to reveal an actor standing in a location courtyard 60 feet below, and into a live crane down huge dripping Greek pillars amidst flashes of 70KW practical lightning.

Impressive – the 2D background, 3D models, animated elements and location shot were all visible in the

frame together, tracked and matched seamlessly.

The scene ended on the priest, his arms raised in a ritual gesture he clearly thought inadequate against the coming vampire attack.

"What do you think?"

"Well, there's something not quite right about –" said Steve, but just then Lucy Hatter, SED/FX's producer on *Vampire, Atlantis!*, put her head round the door.

"Steve, your shot must be finished!"

"No, not yet..."

"Then quit acting as effects supervisor." She looked at him and shook her head. "You look just awful. We'll have to upgrade your flesh shader."

Steve sat at his desk. Helen's Atlantis composite was technically excellent, but there was a spark missing from the whole: you couldn't quite imagine being in the streets of the place.

Why?

He sat up. Because what you saw was all there was: an architect's model of an ideal city, missing a sense of life off the frame or in the buildings.

So remove the single architect. What planner ever designed, coloured, lit and wore out a city all by himself? None; it was the social result of people occupying space over time.

To do it in the computer properly, you would lay out only the basic city plan and some key buildings, then populate the scene with cyberlife norn agents. Give them an upper culture limit and details of the economy and building materials and iterate a hundred generations and what would you get? A natural-looking environment with buildings put up and torn down, houses lit and lived in by their inhabitants and streets constructed on least discomfort trails in a realistically random way: a digital town that had built and bump-mapped itself. You'd have a sense of things going on around the film frame. The virtual camera would be a window into a real place, like a real movie camera.

But if it got too elaborate, would the AI agents think they were alive, and if the computer crashed, would there be norn bodies lying about in the streets, dead butterflies no longer dreaming they were Chuang Tzu?

He shook his head.

Concentrate. Iterate.

Steve put Old Vampy through his act. Head up, look round, and down the boulders like a bunch of coconuts. Oof. The hero in the river would die laughing, not in terror.

He sent the shot off to Erika, telling her it was as ready as it was going to be, and sat back, frustrated. Bugs Bunny would be more believable.

Was that true, and if so, why?

Probably because our intellects could appreciate the character-driven wit of Bugs while his Toony outline did not alert the hunter-gatherer in us to his so-called rab-bithood.

Vampy and all the other digital beasties, from mice to 200-foot lizards stomping Manhattan, were different: looking at least partially realistic, they presumably triggered food and danger alarms deep in our psyches, prompting closer inspection and so greater disappointment when the illusion broke down. Call that a man-eating monster? our primal instincts might ask.

Why, you should have seen the sabre-toothed tigers we had to deal with back in the old days!

He blinked. Must keep focus.

Perhaps old ways were better: using a physical vampire armature to translate manual movements in Harryhausen space to the x,y,z digital realm. A data glove and a VR headset would be an improvement on that, enabling him to step inside the virtual world himself, to walk around and make his changes directly to the CG model.

Or perhaps he should try Todd's character performance thing and really get into it, heart and soul, animating with his whole body instead of simply pushing his mouse about.

Steve closed his eyes and imagined what a vampire would really do on an ancient Mediterranean midday.

The town he conjured up was too Californian-Spanish, but never mind; as he drifted into a lucid daydream he became a solid vampire walking among the sunlit carved stones of young Atlantis, stalking prey with a clatter of unsheathed claws. He bared his teeth, unfurled his leathery wings, spread them wide, and...

Erika knocked on his open door.

"Didn't hear the page? Wake up! Dailies!"

Everyone else was in the darkened conference room by the time Steve came in and sat on the floor.

"The production cannot miss their delivery date," studio president Mark Anderson was saying, again.

"We'll make the deadline," said Lucy. "You'll get a revised schedule today. Things are tight but not disastrous. We've wire-removed, rotoed and comped every greenscreen shot we can. Progress is good..." She checked her laptop. "All down the animation pipeline – even on GT144_3, am I right?"

Steve nodded glumly as Drissa, Steve's immediate boss, spoke. "We think we're on top –"

"Think?" said Mark. "You're 'gonna make the deadline'."

"We'll do it," said Richard Bach, effects supervisor.

"OK, OK," said Mark, swivelling his chair. "Let's roll."

Erika started with some routine comps – actors emoting in front of what was now Atlantis, not the greenscreen they'd shot against in Holland. It looked OK on the monitor, but the real test would be the filmout screening, where you'd see if the digital matte-painted background looked like a believably distant, spacious outdoor panorama or simply a stupid flat wall just behind the actors.

Character shots next. Steve leaned forward. The latest iteration of Drissa's major Three Vampires Fighting scene: three large pinkish creatures, slightly differentiated in size, shape and colour, duked it out in the amphitheatre by moonlight for the neck of the youngest virgin. Drissa was now fully using the complex model controls for fine-tuned animation to tweak little things the audience would not notice directly but might feel missing if they weren't there: subtle spine flexing, jiggling muscles, spreading toes... Beautifully interacting, the three angry vampires punched and bit and rolled on the ground as the camera followed, moving, up, down, left, BLAM! camera shake too.

Why couldn't he get that? Drissa's models were not rendered with hair yet, or properly lit, but were meatily

impressive all the same.

It certainly looked good on the monitor; but as he watched the clip run through again Steve suddenly thought the vampires might prove a little too fast scaled up 20 feet tall on the movie screen. It could look like a scrap between agile domestic cats instead of the 500-pound lumbering bull vampires they were supposed to be, complete with inertia and a wide turning circle.

He made a note. Better if models have their own mass and tensions to work with in every limb and organ; imbued with a sense of their own capabilities.

"What d'you think, Steve?" asked Drissa.

"Need to see it on the big screen," he said. "Still a little way to go." But Brian Newhall, the director, now in Verona prepping *Undead Romeo and Juliet*, was sure to approve this by the end of the week.

Next up was Steve's own effort. He cringed as his lame creation skipped lightly down its boulders, but nobody made any sarcastic comments.

Debbie Stepanovic's shot came on for film-out approval. A terrified vampire, fleeing down a palace corridor from the rage of the mob, finds itself faced with a wall of fire. It looked good; the creature visibly seemed to think before deciding to vault the flames. But again there was something not quite right...

"So, Richard; go to film?" asked Lucy.

"Can I see it again?" asked Steve.

The vampire shied back, then jumped – and seemed to carry on rising! A lack of plausible mass once more. "It's like he's full of helium!" said Steve.

"It is not!" said Debbie.

"He's very heavy..." said Steve.

"It's strong, too," said someone.

Muscles powerful enough to accelerate a big torso that way would probably blow the joints apart first; couldn't they see? "He can't ping up like a grasshopper!" said Steve.

"I know that!" said Debbie. "And he doesn't!"

Drissa Yilla sighed. "I get what Steve means, and it'll be floatier on the big screen. Good eye."

After the meeting ended in triumph with Helen's Opening comp, Debbie walked away briskly, avoiding Steve.

"I got approval," said Todd, stepping in front of him. "Despite you! Life drawing after this show wraps. Dance classes!"

"Great, Todd; gotta run."

"And a big animal park trip too – Hey, wait!"

"OK, count me in on all of it!" said Steve over his shoulder.

He caught up with Debbie at reception, picking up her mail. "You could have raised that before," she said.

"Sorry." Steve narrowed his eyes against the midday sunlight blazing outside the plate glass windows. "I called it soon as I saw it."

"Yeah; 'Good eye.'" Debbie glanced at him. "If a little bloodshot."

"But if you can crack this gravity thing," he said, rubbing his eyes, "you'll look fantastic!"

Debbie smiled, hooking a thumb at the heavy animatronic vampire in the corner. "Why don't I just drop him on you? See if you can crack this gravity thing?" She walked off, leaving Steve to look at Vampy, who just stood there, all surface and no innards.

Demoted to a texture and colour reference once prin-

cipal photography ended, the puppet was still an impressively disgusting object with big yellow teeth and clumps of scraggly hair. He had an undeniable presence simply by being weighty and three-dimensional.

Steve peered inside the opened back. It was hard to imagine a man in there, less wearing a costume than installed in a machine. Rubber, plastics and nylon covered a bulbous muscle suit, the kevlar carbon fibre head had a 40-servo underskull with facial articulation run off portable control boards, and the thing even had AC and R/T for the performer, according to the specs. Claustrophobic, for sure.

The filmed puppet looked good sometimes, especially when backlit and in deep shadow. But when it moved in a brightly-lit scene it was simply too stiff and stuffed to look real, for all the dexterity of the gymnast inside. A real creature, even standing still, has so much more going on than can be mechanically modelled: pumping blood-filled veins, breathing chest, subtly adjusting balance and weight, ears rotating to catch a passing whisper, eyes glinting, fur changing position in the shifting breeze, skin twitching as fleas bite. A real animal is integrated with its ecology and not a solipsistic individual divorced from life.

Steve touched the wiry hair. No fleas on this skin; it was latex, airbrush-painted with veins and pores. But computer-generated Vampy was as much a solitary object too, not part of any world. He should be, and could be.

How about a fully-developed norn with intelligence and memory and complex neural networks made up of virtual biochemistry, dendrites, nodes and decision lobes, evolved in a dynamic ecology of other virtual creatures and plants and made aware of its own movement cycles and personal goals? You could then just leave the vampires to get on with it and they would be fully part of their environment.

Except that for a movie they would have to be persuaded to act instead of simply being manipulated – suppose they preferred hiding in darkness to performing? Steve smiled as he stroked the puppet fur. The problem would be worse.

"Goat hair, yak hair... individually sewn," said Richard Bach behind him. "The puppeteers were great guys. And yet –"

"It looked shit?" said Steve.

Richard glanced at him. "Animatronics isn't that easy..."

"Neither's CG. But I know we can get closer to a perfect holistic simulation... A complete ecology."

"Is that what we want?"

"Of course..."

"Isn't that more for system designers? Like, of power stations? We really want an effective impression..."

"Sounds like second-best," said Steve.

"A perfect simulation is positively undesirable, even if achievable. Which I doubt. We're looking for an emotional response, not engineering acclaim."

"That's a lack of ambition," said Steve. "You know, I can dream the perfect realistic shot."

"What?"

"It's achievable, and I know I can get it!"

"But dreaming means nothing!"

"Maybe. Except my dreams seem so real and 3D. Solid creatures with their own minds, and a whole world for

them to live in.”

“That’s true of everyone’s dreams,” said Richard.

“I dreamed a perfect shot again last night: Vampy Smashes Down Door...”

“CD49_5? You’ve done that, Steve, the neg’s shipped. Great animation. Great TD work.”

“It was OK, but it wasn’t great!” said Steve. “Whereas in my dream, it’s perfect down to the last scraggle! How come I can build a model, animate it, light and render it in real time, stick it in a complete gothic world and scare the crap out of myself all when I’m asleep? It must be possible to use that latent ability to create the software tools we need...”

“But dreams don’t work that way,” said Richard. “They’re really impressionistic. Like matte paintings – impressions with strategic distractions, and our brain fills in the gaps.” He smiled. “Though I did hear of a guy in Mill Valley who dreamed the solution to an image scanning problem.”

“That’s what I mean!”

“Yeah, but... Look. When I first worked on a live movie set with all the lights and action, I got really into it. I got so involved that every night I dreamt a series of fantastically creative camera moves soaring through elaborate crane shots. Probably everyone does that; strawberry pickers dream fields of perfect strawberries. Doesn’t mean they can grow one when they wake up.”

Steve was unconvinced. “If I can create a working world and animate the inhabitants perfectly in a dream, then I can in the computer. I only have to connect to the right places, and we’ll have digital creatures that are as concretely real as anything they can point a camera at on the live set.”

Richard laughed.

“Have you been on a live set, Steve?” he said. “I mean, really been? For months?”

“For a few effects shots. Plates.”

“Well, there’s hardly anything real they point the camera at; even for landscapes they pick their angles to exclude unwanted junk like power lines. Pretty much everything is an in-camera special effect, from make-up to gels. You know that. By itself the camera just stares, indiscriminately; you have to manipulate things – light and shade, action and composition – to direct the audience’s attention. Styrofoam painted to look like stone, and take twelve of a stumbling actor: how real is that?”

And just out of frame in every second of film ever shot is a whole ghostly army of crew and equipment, from director to doughnut table, and a bubble halo of camera light follows made-up people through contrived spaces, and as soon as the big eye and lights move on the characters evaporate, leaving the husk of actors, and the dulled sets are struck; at the end of production the crew scatters and all that remains is miles of film negative that only has coherent narrative meaning when a projector light is shone through an edited positive print onto a white screen with a sentient audience watching.

“Steve?”

“Sorry?”

Richard looked closely at him. “Shouldn’t you get some rest?”

Steve drove with the roof down, warm air whipping his hair; home first to pick up a change of clothes, and on

to the pool.

He had hardly been outdoors in the daytime for the last few days and looked around with curiosity, though it was hard on his eyes. The sun beat down on shimmering roads with a white intensity. The air was too hot, the hills too dry, the palm trees aloof, and the ocean distant, harsh and glittering. The houses seemed to be film sets in a Spanish-style siesta, closed and dozing with no one inside.

The world was thinly alien, subtly changed in his absence. He used to feel like this after staying up all night at college; out of place, a sole survivor of the past in a false new day taken over by possessed people.

Other cars slid by, paintwork gleaming, their occupants anonymous in humming air-conditioned comfort behind their tinted windshields, norn avatars on their way to a city-use convention.

He jerked awake. Nearly ran a stop sign.

The open-air pool was invitingly Hockney-blue. Steve concentrated on his body in space as he bent his knees, leaned forward and pushed out, swinging his arms up and forward and curving into a smooth arc that ended in a satisfying plunge into cool water.

He opened his eyes, stretched out and let his momentum carry him, enjoying the water frothing round his tired mind. Perhaps Todd Rankin should see him now, getting in touch with his inner dolphin. He smiled, bubbles dribbling past his teeth.

He swam the first length underwater. It felt good to get his whole body into something physical for a change, to power through 3D space instead of sitting around half the night growing fat on candy bars and sodas.

He turned at the deep end and pushed off like a torpedo, then transformed seamlessly into – what; an albatross soaring far over the tiles below?

Why not?

Because things can be too seamless; the audience has seen tigers morph into gas stations, they’re smart and know it’s fluid, anything goes. Digital objects have a too loose grasp of their identity over time.

Got to hold that uniqueness.

At the surface he took a deep breath before rhythmically pulling in a slow front crawl, concentrating on his own solidity, his muscles working under his skin as he swam, his joints rotating and sliding. Each arm was a chain, the hierarchy of an inverse kinematics model with rotational constraints, his hand an animated effector pulling the entire skeleton through the x,y,z space of computer water. Maybe vampires would swim like him, if any survived the drowning of Atlantis.

At the end of the pool Steve turned onto his back and floated, gazing at the sky.

Was computer water wet? Perhaps you could drown advanced CGI animals in a virtual bath instead of deleting them from the database the old way.

He sculled gently, enjoying the sense of lightly drifting between air and water, his heartbeat pumping in his ears. He closed his eyes, imagining his body becoming discorporated, his thoughts sliding freely out into the amniotic fluid of the oceans from which life had slubbed to make our blood salty still.

Get in touch with your inner brine.

It was hard to see how the universe made the journey

from heavy elements created in the guts of exploding first-generation stars, via millions of earthly species of life, to him floating idly in a chlorinated swimming pool in an electronic civilization whose entertainment came from the simulation of crashing ships and the rage of fictional creatures.

What about making models of real animals instead, for people living in cities far from nature? For everyone?

That's a project, data-capturing the biosphere; the next stage of the counter-entropic evolution of the universe from energy to matter to life to intelligence and next: information.

Especially as real animals are now compromised; domestic cows and dogs and chickens have been artificial in essence for 10,000 years, and as for wildlife, big-game animals are barely tolerated in the margins and are no longer powerful, independent species with their own territories; in fact, their time is done. Humanity is supremely dominant and we no longer really need actual animals for food and clothing and medical testing or to measure ourselves against; they take up living space and carry diseases and eat the crops, so it's lucky technical development has got so far just when we need it to digitize disappearing species and preserve their encoded forms for the educational nature videos of the endless future; and Steve slipped shells down his archived multi-generational memory files, digging into ancient psychic levels to grasp the primal motion of the perfect archaic creature, and as he drifted on the cusp of consciousness he experienced flashes of darkness, shadows moving in deep history far below him: the structure of creatures not extant, among them large saurians that had come once and gone forever, and the bewildering potential shapes of animals that might have been and should have been but never had evolved in this iteration of the multiverse.

The aquatic vampire, for instance.

He felt a shiver down his spine and stood up with a splash, coughing and spluttering.

He raised his mouse hand into the air, letting the wetness element run through his fingers. Tiny points of sunlight danced in each drop. He thought of all the billion billion points of light in the dataspace of every nanosecond in all the empty water across the world. The visible universe was an awesome energy processing machine, that was for sure. But one day we'll crack it.

He clambered out of the pool, dripping sparkling stars which no one saw.

Back in the darkness of his office that evening, after the screening of the latest filmed-out shots, Steve felt depressed. They were never going to get it, none of them.

The shots all looked bad. Dead matte paintings, flat and lifeless as cement. And, blown up full size on the big screen, none of the creatures looked right any more, but massless tissue-paper vampires all too light, ludicrously light, peeling off the screen frame by frame and fluttering like butterflies up around the ceiling.

I don't want to produce seamless cheating fields of light pixels, I want solid creatures that have identity over time. Make them round and real! Make them heavy and massive and able to punch!

First, make the deadline.

He sat forward. He breathed deep.

The windows on his monitor were real windows.

His hand closed over his mouse and it was an extension of his arm.

He cleared his mind of the cluttering CGI jargon of metaballs, hierarchies, patches, B-spline deformation, jitter, null constrained camera and Skeleton | Move Joint | Pick Joint By Mouse.

He would be in the scene as he had been in the pool, feeling the muscles of Old Vampy, feeling his grievances and ancient longing, wanting the warm blood of the man in the river. He is no hero but an enemy, murderer of my kin: he took wooden stakes and hammered them into their chests, he cut off their heads with a bronze spade and burned the bodies in the flame.

I want to tear into that human flesh and drink his blood to the last drop and toss his remains into the heaving sea. I'm a massive curving flesh torpedo on jack-hammer legs with big teeth and deliberate vengeance in my heart and I'm bearing down like the angel of death on that feeble mortal vessel and I'll crush him utterly in payment for the humiliations he has heaped on me and my kind...

Steve sat back.

Would it work? The 3D environment was just a shadow of the blistering universe of his dreams; the computer was not yet subtle, it did not understand the anguish and exultation of vampires.

He previewed.

Well. A little better. The vampire's paws were not sticking to the ground so much. The head looked more goal-oriented. The torso still didn't flow well; it looked floaty, a balloon changing vector unconvincingly. It should be more like a dolphin following a motion path with little deviation, a skier on a mogul field whose body stays smooth while the legs pump.

It was a small improvement, that was all.

Perhaps going swimming had helped. He would try life classes. Dancing. Field trips.

He sat back and closed his eyes, imagining himself bobbing gently in the pool, mind floating away to chase down wisps of gossamer dream that contained the codes he needed to put together a living, breathing vampire with teeth. One day he could just buy one and a whale and a velociraptor and a cow from some digital farmer who'd raised pups to earn their living in special effects movies and schools and people's homes. Animals would be better off that way, anyway, pure, their forms saved forever in dataspace, living reincarnated in a wonderfully sunny Tipler environment of teeming abundance and no death, no longer suffering the persecution, manginess, pollution, starvation, marginalization and gawping of tourists that they had to endure in the current world of flesh and concrete and barbed wire.

What would that all look like?

Someone kept paging him about pizzas in the conference room and then a cappuccino and his car but he ignored them, concentrating on floating up like a bubble from the abyss to a bright surface and beyond to where all his screens shone, six, seven, eight enormous monitor screens surrounding him in a buzzing video room, a rising VR data-capture probe in an environment of soaring blueness where the radiosity was intense but the software was real-time ray-tracing and shading an infinity of purposeful models that constantly erupted from the

tree of life: rhinos, kangaroos, giraffes; polar bears and penguins together at last, and chunky polygony crocs lying log-like in a lake, all parading their formal perfection as high order cyberlife agents in a world that sang.

"And look at the elephant," he whispered, writing a note. Big slow-flapping ears and a lumbering gait, full of solidity and the sense of life and flowing blood. If Todd were here...

"Yes, Steve?" said Todd.

Steve dropped his notebook and held his mouse hand up and shouted and the creatures' heads all moved... Telepathy almost. If only he could take it all back with him to show Debbie and Richard and Drissa and Lucy and Helen!

Was that frogs croaking? "Look!" said Steve. "We're reincarnating the frogs!"

"What?" said Lucy.

"Must be a resolution of a bazillion pixels a cubic inch out there and it's super-holographic!" said Steve, his eyes boiled bright and glistening, and he threw his arms wide and some of the darkness between the screens fell away as he opened the door.

"Steve!" shouted Richard. "Come back!" But he was already pushing deep into z-space; Richard started to climb down after him.

"No one follows!" shouted Ed the driver, walkie in hand. "That's an order!"

"But..." said Helen, watching through the window. Steve was distant now, carved in sunlight in the midst of the environment, running towards a water-filled moat.

Ed was calling in park rangers. Urgent, calm.

"Come back, you idiot!" yelled Debbie.

Fantastic highlights and refractions in the water; Steve splashed in the shallows, exulting in the sparkles.

A big lion on top of the hill turned his head to watch. Steve looked up at the shifting geometry silhouetted against the sky. "Hey!" he yelled in joy.

"Steve!" shouted Drissa.

The big cat shape got ponderously to its feet, leaned out into space and jumped massively down onto the boulder below, and down, boulder to boulder, in measured, weighty leaps, fur sharply delineated, Steve grinning all the while as he knew he could do it too.

An armed ranger jeep kicked up dust elements in the distance as it raced towards the stopped safari minibus.

"Steve!" shouted Todd.

The lion came to a halt at the water's edge and stood, heavy tail swishing slowly and menacingly, eyes locked with Steve's.

There were beautifully subtle contact shadows under its feet. Steve forced himself to look, to remember every bristling hair, every muscle twitch. He splashed forward.

The lion roared, baring sharp teeth.

Steve laughed and reached out a hand, as happy as he would ever be.

Nicholas Waller, born 1958, wrote the well-received story "The Travel Agent" (*Interzone* 130). A peripatetic publicist (and sometime storyboard assistant on the movie *An American Werewolf in Paris*), he seems to spend much of his time in Hollywood, where his brother Anthony is a film director. His home base is in Luton, Bedfordshire.

"doesn't just make the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end – it rips them out with no prior warning" –THE TIMES

PULP FICTIONS

No Frills, Just Thrills

www.Pulpfictions.co.uk

A collectable library of pulp classics, spanning SF, Fantasy, Horror, Romance, crime – start your collection today.



SHE (ISBN: 1-902058-03-8) AYESHA (ISBN: 1-902058-04-6) SHE & ALLAN (ISBN: 1-902058-05-4)

Coming Soon – November 1998

WHEN THE WORLD SHOOK by H.Rider Haggard (ISBN: 1-902058-07-0)

KIDNAPPED BY CANNIBALS by Dr.Gordon Stables (ISBN: 1-902058-06-2)

"those fine folks at
Pulp Publications"
– SFX Magazine

"SUPERB"
– THE BOOKSELLER

"Tales of lurid
splendour"
– The Telegraph

Orders: Send cheque for £4.99 + £1.00 P+P payable to Pulp Publications Ltd to

PO Box 144, Polegate, East Sussex, BN26 6NW. Please enclose an SAE for a FREE catalogue detailing our range of titles.

Colonies

Lawrence Dyer

I pulled hard on the rope and raised myself up to the level of the first tufts of grass. A chubby hand appeared before my face, the wrist beneath the white cuff thick with freckles and red-brown hairs. My foothold on the limestone of the cave entrance wasn't firm, so with an effort I shifted my weight and grasped the hand. Then through a combination of my own efforts and the owner of the hand pulling, I fell sprawling onto the sheep-mown grass of the hillside above.

As I panted for breath I saw all around me the legs of the invited experts. The group was discussing what we had all just seen in the cave, the excited conversation drifting away into the vastness of the Dales landscape. Turning towards the owner of the hand who still gripped mine I was confronted not by the hi-tech terrain footwear of the rest of the group, but by a pair of polished brown brogues beneath orange-brown tweed trousers, carefully pressed trousers at that.

The hand yanked my arm and I rose awkwardly to my feet. Only then did he let go.

"Thanks," I said.

He regarded me with a supercilious indifference though the hint of a smile was on his lips.

"It's um... quite hard to get back up out of there," I added to fill the gap left by his silence.

Still he didn't speak, only watched me with what must be among the most extraordinary eyes I'd ever seen. Yellow-green and penetrating, they bulged beneath a set of wiry ginger eyebrows that were rolled together at the ends into a little coil on either side. In my entire life – and despite their frequency in stories – I couldn't recall seeing many individuals with green eyes, let alone this vivid yellow-green. As far as I could remember I had only seen green eyes in combination with dark Celtic hair before. Yet here before me was this portly, red-haired man dressed in an immaculate tweed suit that almost matched the colour of his hair and beard... with the most surprising yellow-green eyes.

He still hadn't spoken, and finding this too uncomfortable as we stood face to face in the huddle of jabbering experts, I tried again to get a response out of him.

"The footprints, in the mud down there..." I pointed back down the pothole that led to the cave. "Amazing to think they're three-and-a-half thousand years old. They could have been made yesterday, they look so fresh! And skeletons of two adults and a child – it's got to be a major Bronze Age find for this country. Wish I'd been in on it from the outset."

The superiority on his deathly-white face had, if anything, grown as I spoke, and standing there as he was in his immaculate clothes I suddenly wondered if he had even been down into the chamber below and seen what

the rest of us were so excited about.

"They're nothing!" he said so suddenly that I was forced to step back before the tiny explosion of saliva that sprayed from his lips. "If you'd seen what I've seen... Believe me, what's in this cave – they're just dead things!" He turned and slid away through a gap in the crowd.

The arrogance of the man! The greatest Bronze Age find of the decade and he called it "nothing"! What was he, an Egyptologist? Was he the excavator of the frozen royal tombs of Siberia? Or of the terracotta army in China? What could he have seen in his life to make him dismiss so easily this wonderful find in the Dales? And what had he meant by "they're just dead things"? That was a very odd thing indeed for an archaeologist to say.

The next time I saw the ginger-haired man I was raising a glass of ale to my lips. I caught sight of him in the plate-glass mirror behind the bar where we had all gone for a drink after viewing the find in the cave. The glass froze in my hand, the watery froth of the beer lapping my lower lip, as I watched him in the mirror. He was talking to one of the archaeologists who was working on the cave site, the organizer of our visit in fact. Ginger had that same look of superiority that I had seen up on the hillside, but he didn't seem to have startled the organizer with his words in the way he had startled me, for the grey-haired, neatly-attired woman was nodding and talking amiably with him.

I took a gulp of my beer, then my attention was distracted by an acquaintance in the group of archaeologists and I was drawn into conversation. When next I looked up, Ginger was alone, close to finishing his drink and looking as if he was about to leave. I had to find out what made him so superior to the rest of us, and what he had meant by speaking so oddly of the bones in the cave.

I moved as casually but quickly as I could to the table where he was sitting. "Mind if I sit down?"

He didn't look up, but with an assured movement indicated a chair.

I took it. "Jim Alexander," I introduced myself. "I've been at York for the past six months, by way of Bristol and Strathclyde. I was at Strathclyde University for 15 years."

He nodded as if he wasn't particularly interested in my career to date. Knocking back what was left of his drink – it looked like Scotch – he placed the glass carefully on the table.

"Look," I said, realizing that he wasn't going to introduce himself. "I couldn't help being interested in what you said out there."

His eyes slid up from under his brows and fixed on me.

"I mean, I..."

"What you mean, Mr Alexander, is that you want to

know what I meant by calling those bones 'dead things'...?" He had a slightly strange way of talking, not a foreign accent exactly, more a way of putting stresses on the wrong syllables.

Surprised by the accuracy of his observation, I nodded.

He leant towards me and lowered his voice. "Ever heard of 'living archaeology,' Mr Alexander?"

"I've heard the phrase," I said, not knowing what to make of this.

He raised an eyebrow. "I doubt very much you've even the barest clue what I'm talking about."

I didn't like being belittled like this. "All right, what are you talking about?"

He leant even closer until I could see every wiry hair of his brows standing out in front of my eyes like miniature tentacles. "I'm talking about survival." His voice had sunk to a whisper.

"Survival?"

"Lost cultures that have survived into our time."

"Well, there are many such cultures around the world, of course," I conceded. "Ways of life that have remained largely unchanged for hundreds of years, despite the western world..."

He shook his head slowly, his eyes despising my naïvete. "No, no, no. I'm speaking of cultures – groups of people – that have been physically removed from modern life for hundreds of years, groups that have never even heard of modern people. Here, in Britain."

This was too much. "That's ridiculous!"

He smirked. Reaching into his pocket, he passed me what I took at first to be a beer-mat held face-down. Instinctively I reached for it, interested to see where this madman's proclivities might lead.

He hesitated, holding the mat under his hand. "Don't let anyone else see this."

I looked into his eyes. They were deadly serious, penetrating to the point that I had to agree with his request. I took the mat and turned it over, holding it close to me so that only I could see it. What I saw made me gasp.

It was a photograph, a holographic one, in fact, though it wasn't this which caught my attention so powerfully. The picture showed something spectacular, if it was to be believed: by far the finest and most elaborate gold Saxon altar-piece that I had ever seen. In fact there was no such altar-piece in existence. Something so remarkable as this would be very well known in the archaeological world.

"What is this?"

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like something that's impossible."

He closed his eyes in a silent laugh. "It isn't, I assure you. That picture was taken not 20 miles from here. The object belongs to a group of people who have never seen a car or an aeroplane – or even the inside of a public house."

I gaped. "Twenty miles... You're talking about here, in the Dales?"

He nodded and a broad smirk spread across his features.

It was a brick terraced house no different from a thousand others in this former mill-town that crowded a valley at the edge of the hills. I peered out at the house from under the sun-visor of my car, looking for some sign of the unusual, then dropped my gaze to the piece of paper

Ginger had given me – I still didn't know his name. One-six-one: the number tallied. This was the place.

He opened the door the moment I knocked, and with a wave of his hand invited me in. The front door opened straight onto a room full of cardboard boxes. There were several desks too, one with a PC humming away on it. The PC had a blue and red screen-saver that turned itself endlessly inside out. The whole place looked more like a run-down office than someone's home. He led the way up a flight of stairs with light-blue painted bannisters. On the first floor I followed him to what must once have been the master bedroom. Positioned centrally on the emulsioned Edwardian panels of the door was a small oval shape, an eye emblem of some kind. We went inside and I stopped short at what I saw there.

This room was nothing like the one downstairs. Surprisingly large, it was crowded with expensive-looking video monitors and computers – a hi-tech surveillance centre was the impression I had at once. There was another man in the room, a heavy-set individual with dull-looking eyes. He sat on a chair behind a row of monitors at the back of the room.

Ginger didn't introduce him, instead he motioned at a padded, black-leather chair before one of the monitors. "Sit here, Mr Alexander."

Most of the monitors in the room were switched on and for a moment, on one that was across the room, I thought I caught a glimpse of myself walking past a building somewhere. I stared hard at the monitor, but it was showing something else now.

"Mr Alexander?" There was a slight impatience in Ginger's voice as he continued to indicate the chair.

Uneasily, I sat down. There was a click, and the dead monitor before me flickered into life. From the less than sharp quality of the image that appeared I guessed I was looking at a video recording. It showed the inside of some sort of chapel, but there were no stained-glass windows or vaulted ceilings. This was a very simple, square room, set out like the basic interior of a remote kirk you might visit on an island off the coast of Ireland or Scotland. And there on the white-clothed altar was the huge gold cross of the holographic photo I still had in my pocket.

Ginger held down a button on the console and the image of the chapel broke up into fast-forward. People whizzed in and out, then settled in the carved wooden pews. Ginger let the tape play at normal speed again. A man was standing at the front, addressing the "congregation." Like them he wore an outfit that, exactly as Ginger whispered in my ear at that moment, looked more reminiscent of Robin Hood than anything else I could immediately identify.

I listened to what the man in the video was saying. "German?" I asked. "They're speaking in German?"

"Listen more carefully," Ginger said at my side.

I did. There was a silence before the man spoke again and I had the clear impression that this was not a play being acted out. The whole thing had the disjointed, unprepared feel that you would expect if something real had been filmed.

When the man next spoke at length I began to pick up words that I could understand – lots of words! Of course, a Brit can understand the occasional word in German, but here there were many words that I could pick up, strangely pronounced as they were, though I couldn't

really follow what the speaker was talking about.

"Dutch, then," I suggested, though I knew this certainly wasn't Dutch.

Ginger laughed deridingly. "It's Anglo-Saxon."

"What? But nobody in the world speaks Anglo-Saxon today."

"These people do."

I shook my head. This had to be an elaborate trick and these people were speaking some exotic variant of Norwegian still used in some remote fjord or whatever that I had never heard of.

"I'm not convinced," I told him, though part of me was, for I was now recognizing words from my studies of Anglo-Saxon as an undergraduate. Then I remembered what he had said before. "These are the colony of people you were telling me about who live in the Yorkshire Dales?"

"Very near here."

I turned to him in confusion – his claims made no sense, yet all this expensive equipment wasn't there for some silly joke. "But how? What is it you're saying?"

"They live underground. In one of the many undiscovered cave-systems in the limestone hills."

"Oh, come on!" I pushed back my chair. "You've got to be joking –"

"There are many caves under the hills, you'll concede that?"

His whole assertion was so ridiculous that I was suddenly interested to see how far he would go with the charade. "Yes, I'll grant you that there must be undiscovered caves – one or two new ones are discovered every now and then by cavers."

"And what if a group of people had got trapped inside such a cave system a thousand years ago – in Saxon times – and been unable to get out again? Wouldn't they have established a living there? Hmm? What you see are their descendants, still practising the same way of life."

"This is absurd!" I stood up.

Ginger's accomplice caught my eye. He had an earnest look about him, as of one not given to elaborate con tricks. That in itself should have warned me that I was being taken in, but his look seemed to knock the wind out of me somehow, and I sat down again.

"If this is a cave," I said, gesturing at the image on the monitor, "then where is the light coming from?"

"We're not sure about that," Ginger said. "It may be that phosphorescent fungi provide a light source in those caves."

I shook my head, yet had become compelled now to go on with the argument. "But this doesn't look like a cave. Are there other rooms?"

"Of course there are other rooms. Many, many other rooms. And of course over the centuries these people have turned their world into the one they had once known."

"But surely in all that time they would have found a way out again?"

"Not if they had forgotten that there was an outside, not if they believed the world was their caves."

I sighed heavily and shook my head, watching the image on the screen. The man at the front of the chapel was conducting a service now, what looked like a very early Christian church service, complete with chanting and rhythmic swaying. I had once seen something similar in Ethiopia, where the Christian church there, cut

off from the west for centuries, has preserved many of the features of the early European churches.

Again I shook my head. "It's just impossible, that's all."

As I followed Ginger further along the narrow tunnel the floor grew steeper and I was getting more and more tired. I was finding it hard to breathe.

"Is there enough air in here?"

"Don't worry, it's safe." He glanced back at me and one of his eyes was thrown into shadow by the little electric light on the wall beside him.

He turned and went on ahead of me with remarkable ease, his jacket pockets bulging on one side with the blindfold he had insisted I wear for the last 15 minutes of our walk from his landrover to the secret tunnel entrance in an unspecified hillside. On the other side of his bulky figure, his jacket bulged with a bundle of my money. A thousand pounds that I had been persuaded to part with if I was to be allowed to see the underground Saxon world with my own eyes, rather than through the medium of video-tape and hidden cameras. I still believed I was being conned, yet there was so much authenticity about what I had seen so far, that there had to be something in all this more than worth finding out about, even if it wasn't what Ginger claimed. And even if it did cost me a reluctant thousand pounds. I might not have been willing to risk the thousand at all if I hadn't had the photograph of the gold cross looked at by an expert on Saxon artifacts. She had been very interested in it indeed and had demanded to know where I had got the picture.

"It's a clever computer-generated image of an imaginary cross, extrapolated from existing crosses," I had lied.

She had shaken her head in disbelief. "But it looks completely authentic to me. If I knew the whereabouts of such a cross –"

"It's amazing what computers can do nowadays, isn't it!" I had said with a grin.

As I laboured along the tunnel behind Ginger I pressed my hands even harder against the smooth limestone wall of this tube through the rock that led to the hidden world, a tunnel that Ginger claimed had been bored only recently with highly specialized, low decibel equipment.

We passed a round metal door on the right, then up ahead I could make out through Ginger's legs that the tunnel ended in some metal steps. He stopped at the bottom of the steps and turned to confront me. His whiter-than-white skin was filmed with moisture – so he was human after all. As for myself, I was by then feeling light-headed and even a bit faint. He drew something from his pocket and I stared at it uncomprehendingly. It looked like a personal organizer, and he studied the little screen, pressing buttons. Just above the screen was a little "eye" symbol like the one on the door upstairs in his house.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure the room above and those adjoining it are empty..."

"We're under the chapel?"

He nodded, concentrating on the tiny screen. I leant closer and he snapped the case shut and looked up at me with a beaming smile.

"No problem," he said. "We wouldn't want anyone to hear us until we're settled, would we?" His manner

changed, and he became more serious. "Now, you must agree not to speak or make any noise. Do you agree?"

I nodded.

"This steel trap over my head is soundproofed, but once I open it... We'll step up a couple of steps, and we'll be from the chest up inside a wooden trunk inside the chapel. We'll be able to see out through a gap under the lid. Now remember, absolute silence from now on."

Silently, he released the steel trap door, then a wooden one inside it. Standing beside him on the steps I moved up until I was head and shoulders inside an enclosed box that smelt of incense. As he had said there was a crack where the lid of the box didn't meet up properly with the front, and I pressed my eyes to it.

Suddenly here I was face to face with the place I had seen in the video. It was the same yet compared with the video it looked smaller somehow, the details stood out more sharply, the colours were rich and intense. Like a kid on vacation for the very first time, I couldn't actually believe I was there. Yet, all the while, the rational side of me was fighting this sense of awe, saying one word over and over: hoax. Hoax. HOAX.

We couldn't have been there two minutes when there was a sound from beyond the large wooden door of the chapel and someone came running in. It was a youth of about 14, dressed in dark woollen clothes – again like Robin Hood, as Ginger had so unscientifically put it when we watched the video of these people. The boy was carrying a metal bowl which he quickly put down on a small table just inside my line of vision. The bowl went out of view behind him, I saw his ornate leather belt as he turned – too close to make out what he was doing – then there came the sound of metal objects falling onto the stone floor. And several coins rolled along the floor between his feet.

There came a shout from beyond the room, and the boy replied quickly. I couldn't make out the words – though it was the same language as in the video – but I could sense the exasperation, fear almost, that he tried to mask with a casual reply. He bent down, quickly picking up the coins and dropping them into the bowl. He positioned the bowl centrally on the little table and went quickly out.

The whole thing was all over in moments. *And I was sure he had missed one of the coins!*

We waited three quarters of an hour without seeing a sign of anybody else.

"Clearly no one is coming," I whispered to Ginger.

He turned on me with a stern frown in the semi-darkness of the box, for I had broken his rule about making no noise.

I shrugged. "There's no one here. Look, I'd love to get a better look at some of those artifacts..." I indicated the altar.

He continued to frown at me.

"Can't I just lift the lid of this thing we're in? I wouldn't try to get out or anything."

He sighed heavily. "All right!" His voice was a hiss. "But that's all. And only this one time – never again under any circumstances."

I nodded.

"You must swear it."

This was melodramatic, but I suppose I could see his point. "I swear."

I began to move but he caught my arm and held on. With his free hand he took from his pocket the odd-looking personal organizer.

"Just what is that?"

"Person-proximity detector."

"That?"

"It's just a relay device. It picks up information broadcast by our network. Wait a moment."

With his fleshy index finger he pressed repeatedly on one of the keys, and I could see that he was tuning it in to whatever signals were being broadcast by his "network," whatever that was. He punched more buttons.

"Okay," he said slowly, concentrating on the little screen of the device. "The nearest person is 226 feet away. You may lift the lid, but only for a minute. On no account attempt to do more."

I nodded. Then, with his help, I lifted the lid above my head. Stepping onto the top step below the level of the wooden box, I raised myself head and shoulders above the box's carved edge as Ginger supported the lid.

My view of the cross was much better. I searched desperately for signs of forgery. To my dismay I could see none. The hammered work, the patina of the gold, everything was right.

I was suddenly determined to see if all this was as real as it looked. I had to touch the place, and allowed the arm that was away from Ginger to fall silently over the side of the trunk. My fingers touched the stone floor. It felt cold, solid.

"Amazing," I whispered, still looking at the cross and hoping to distract Ginger's attention from what I was really doing.

Without moving my shoulder I felt around on the floor. The coin that the youth had not retrieved was around there somewhere, I was sure. If only... then I touched it. Moving my arm a little further, I picked the coin up between two fingers and drew it carefully back into the palm of my hand.

"Does this place get full at times of worship?" I asked, then under cover of Ginger's answer I smoothly slipped my hand back into the box and slid the coin into my pocket.

"Sometimes it does," he said. He sounded slightly irritated, and for a moment I thought my secret actions had been discovered.

"That's long enough."

Obediently I stepped back and lowered my head. Ginger closed the lid over us.

"Come on," he whispered, "I'll show you some other rooms."

"We can see other rooms?"

"Of course. Not only do we have hidden cameras in other parts of this place, but other physical view-points too."

Amazed, I followed him backwards down the steps. He closed the wooden flap above our heads and turned a crude metal locking mechanism, then raised into position the heavy steel trap door and locked that too. This time the lock was a sophisticated combination device with half a dozen numbers – I hadn't noticed it when he opened it before.

"Why two doors?"

He regarded me with his superior eyes – they looked more yellow than ever in the light of the electric lamp

on the tunnel wall. "The first flap forms the floor of their trunk. There's no reason in the world why they would ever try to rip it up, but if they did they'd reach what appears to be a limestone slab – that's really part of our metal door – and if they smashed the slab then they'd find only our metal door and they'd never get through that. So, they'd be confused by the door, but that's all. They'd put it down to a strange seam of bedrock, perhaps. Whatever the case, the integrity of their world would still remain intact."

His breaths were white in the cool air.

"What if they move the trunk?"

"The wooden floor of the trunk fastens with an authentic iron catch – you saw me turn it – they'd just discover that the bottom of their trunk opens, that's all."

I nodded. "And the steel door is sound-proof?"

"I said so."

During the next hour I followed Ginger down more tunnels. Three times we "surfaced" into hidden places inside furniture or the walls themselves, and looked out through cracks or little holes at Saxon rooms. There was to my immense surprise even a sequence of vast caverns planted with crops! Bit by bit I was getting an impression of the huge scale of this "Saxon" settlement, if that was what it really was. I heard and saw more people talking in their strange German-sounding language that had so much "English" in it.

Back up on the surface at last, I stood on the open hillside while Ginger locked the rusty outer door of the cave-mouth – designed, he said, to look like an old mine entrance. Around me the open hillside was bare, grassy, treeless. A hundred yards away a few sheep were innocently grazing. To think that under the ground beneath them was a great complex of rooms, huge caverns, even a small lake! If all this was some kind of incredibly elaborate hoax then what was it all for? To create all of this inside the hillside would have cost billions, and it certainly couldn't be for my benefit or the benefit of those like me. The scale of it all would have left the locals well aware of what was going on and surely no cover story would have prevented the press becoming aware of it too. On the other hand, if it was already there, hidden underground, if it had been hidden for a thousand years, then no locals might even know about it...

Back in Ginger's landrover I sat in the front passenger seat and tried to catch my breath. It had all been too much to take in, too much to get my mind around. Behind me from where he sat in the back, Ginger's assistant rested his elbow on the dividing panel between us. "You have told him about the other sites?" His voice was loud, a blast of air.

I turned quickly and stared at his broad, open face and dull eyes. "There are other sites?"

"Of course," Ginger said. "Fourteen in all."

"Fourteen!" I was agog. "Fourteen like the one I've just seen? Colonies of people cut off since the Dark Ages?"

Ginger was nodding vigorously. He stopped to correct me. "Not all since the Dark Ages."

My hair moved in the blast of the voice behind me. "There exist populations that have survived from various times." Like Ginger, he had a way of putting the emphasis in the wrong place in a sentence, but he did it

more often, and mispronounced words. He was a continental perhaps, though I couldn't tell where from exactly.

But that was the least of my concerns. Questions about what he had told me raced through my mind. "Populations from various times? Here? In the Dales?"

Ginger chuckled, a rather unpleasant sound like water gurgling down a plug-hole. "Two populations in Wales, seven in Scotland, five in England. And they're not all inside cave complexes. At Colchester in Essex we've a small Roman population who have survived in isolation in catacombs under the town. In London there's a built-over street alongside a river that's been completely cut off since the 1860s. The beggars and poor who lived there just got entombed along with their hovels when it was all built over. The only way out since then would be to swim underwater for a quarter of a mile, but of course nobody ever has. They know that Queen Victoria must be dead by now – though their calculations are out and the year in their country is two years behind ours – but they don't know who is king or queen now. They've devised their own royal family! A royal family of beggars – think of it!"

I was, and my mind was boggling with it all. "And the Romans under Colchester – they must think there's still a Roman empire!"

Ginger turned to me, his face deadpan. "Oh no. They've been cut off far too long to be thinking about what's outside. We've watched them for a long time. They believe they are the only people in the universe. They still speak Latin and they wear Roman clothes."

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. "Ahh... You'll have to excuse me. All this... And I'm feeling so incredibly tired. I shouldn't be..."

"It's perfectly understandable," Ginger said. "It's a lot to take on all together."

"You've been studying all these... these colonies?"

Ginger nodded. "But we feel the need for more experts, such as yourself."

"Then you're not archaeologists?" I asked, knowing full well by now that they weren't.

Ginger chuckled, that same bath-water sound. "Us! Oh no."

"We have much more... *daring*," the man in the back boomed.

I twisted around to face him.

"We sometimes live with them."

"What?" I turned back to Ginger for an explanation.

"He's talking about the times we've mingled with the populations –"

"But how? Did you tell them you were from outside?"

"Not exactly. We have mingled with three of the populations, but it's only possible to do so with cultures which have not been cut off from outside for too long. They must be cultures that would still find it conceivable that people could come from outside – that there could be visitors. Not like the Roman population under Colchester, for example, or even the Anglo-Saxons. And we have never made ourselves known to any culture in general, only ever to one individual in a population." He sighed as if with the effort of explaining. "And always it has taken a lot of preparation, learning to speak exactly like the people, dressing like them, convincing the chosen individual that it is possible for them to meet someone they have never seen before – and some of the

underground systems go on for miles, which can help. You see it has been important to us not to influence or affect the preserved culture in any way."

My head was reeling with having to take in these further revelations – the effort had become a physical pain. "I think I should be getting back," I said. "I'm very tired I'm afraid."

Ginger smiled congenially. "Of course, Mr Alexander. But first we have to discuss the matter of your future with us and what it is going to cost you..."

I awoke from a dream in which I was excavating the Saxon chapel. Scraping away crumbs of hard soil, I had uncovered the Saxon cross, untarnished as high-purity gold always is when unearthed. And nearby, not having fared as well, were the brown bones of the youth I had seen.

My head heavy and aching, I got up and went in my pyjamas across to my writing desk. Beyond, through the large picture window of my flat I could see the neatly-mown expanses of grass that formed part of the campus at York. Tired and with legs that didn't seem to want to do as I told them, I sat down at the desk and dragged a pen and notebook before me. Then I set about making some notes about what I'd seen in the "Saxon colony" the day before, wanting to capture the details while they were still clear.

Yet I found myself strangely vague about many of those details. After the boy had come into the chapel (little more than moments after we arrived ourselves) I had stood for another 45 minutes, legs growing more and more uncomfortable, eagerly taking in every detail of the place: studying it, in fact, mentally recording every facet, every knot mark in the wood of the altar bench, every stud in its facing.

Yet now, I wasn't even sure that there had been studs, or knot-marks, or even an altar bench at all. The only thing I was absolutely sure of was that *there ought to have been an altar bench*, as it was a chapel. Yet I did remember the cross, though I was vague about what the walls were like, or the construction of the door that exited to other rooms. Other parts of the Saxon colony I was even less clear about, almost as if I had only been told about them. Yet I still had the coin and the photograph of the Cross.

I pulled open the drawer of my desk and took the coin out. It was crudely made, hammered out of some fairly soft copper alloy. To call it a coin was for want of a better word – it may have had religious rather than monetary value. For hammered into it was a depiction of the Holy Mother and Child. As far as I could tell it was authentic. I had seen enough roughly similar coins before to know it was genuine. The only real strangeness about it was the odd lettering which I could only just make out. But then after a thousand years there would have to be some aspects of this culture that would have changed.

I gripped the coin tightly in my fist, pressing it into my hand until it began to hurt, trying to dispel the feeling of unreality I had about yesterday's experiences, the feeling that I was remembering something from much longer ago than only the day before. Perhaps it was the excitement of the experience that had bleached some of the details from my mind.

After breakfast I stopped at the bank on my way to work. Checking my bank balance I found it woefully short of the £40,000 Ginger had asked for if I was to play a full part in investigating the colonies – as I well knew it would be. Some £37,000 short, in fact, no surprise at all. But I could take out a mortgage on the rambling old house in Strathclyde that I still owned – not having been sure if I would return there next year. I could, but did I want to?

I sat in a chair at the bank while I thought it over, playing with a black plastic pen attached to a black plastic disc by a chain. I was already late for work, but that wouldn't have to matter. On a paying-in slip on the desk I drew two columns as I weighed it all up, leaving the columns unlabelled. That I wanted desperately to accept Ginger's offer to study the colonies I had no doubts. It was the greatest opportunity I could ever have been presented with, even if it wasn't strictly speaking archaeological work, but a kind of anthropology. That it would cost £40,000 was a small price to pay for the greatest opportunity that any academic could ever hope to receive. Wouldn't you sell your house for the most wonderful chance in your life that could ever present itself? I put a tick in the left column I had drawn.

Yet I felt angry with Ginger. What he was doing – keeping the knowledge of the colonies' existence secret, that was unethical. Selfish. Indefensible. And if I joined his little organization I'd be just as guilty as him. I ticked the left column.

Looking at the two ticks on either side of the central line, looking at their symmetry, I didn't know what to do. Then it came to me. I would contact the British Archaeological Institute and persuade them to fund me – it wouldn't be easy, but it wasn't impossible. Perhaps for years before Ginger's organization was finally exposed to the public gaze, the Institute might fund my research as part of a kind of undercover operation. I'd be able to get involved in Ginger's group while maintaining my ethical position.

But how to contact the Institute? Since I had left home that morning I'd had the strangest feeling that I was being watched. It wouldn't have surprised me to know that Ginger's surveillance extended well beyond watching the colonies, but I had seen no real evidence of that. Yet rational or not, I had the strongest feeling that I was under surveillance myself. So strong was this that it stopped me making a telephone call to the Institute to arrange a meeting at which I might put my case for some initial funding. Through the plate glass doors of the bank I could see a block of public pay-phones in the street. There was no way that Ginger could bug public phones – the idea was ludicrous. Yet the idea of using one of the phones, even to make an appointment about unspecified business, filled me with an absolute dread of discovery. This was strange, to say the least – I wasn't normally given to paranoia. E-mail was out for similar reasons, so that left only writing a letter. I had the time needed to send it and receive a response: Ginger had instructed me to bring the first instalment of the money to his house as soon as I had it, preferably within a week.

So, using a sheet of the bank's stationery, I wrote a brief letter to the vice-president of the Institute, expressing how important it was that we met as soon as possible, whilst not revealing what I had uncovered. I put the letter into one of the bank's envelopes then left

to buy some stamps. Shortly I was standing before a postbox. Yet I couldn't post the letter. Again I had been seized by a desperate sense of betrayal of Ginger and the fear of being discovered. There was no rational way in the world that Ginger's group could know that I was writing to the Institute or why, yet when I lifted the letter up towards the mouth of the postbox my hand trembled and stopped short.

This was absolutely crazy. I felt sure that passers-by were looking at me oddly as I stood frozen before the post box with the letter raised in one hand.

"Do you want me to put that in for you, love?"

I turned my head to see an old woman at my side, a wodge of her own letters in little pink envelopes grasped firmly in her hand.

Weakly, I nodded.

She fed her own letters into the gaping red mouth of the postbox, then carefully took mine from me. I gasped and my frozen hand twitched as I saw my letter eaten by that great red mouth.

And then I knew it was too late. I knew with absolute certainty that I had blown it, that I had lost the greatest opportunity of my life. I should have mortgaged my house, not worried about ethics, become part of Ginger's group.

But a tiny part of me still fought against this irrationality of my feelings. Go to Ginger's house, it said, make an excuse for being there – take him the 3,000 in your account as a first instalment. Check that everything's still all right.

And forgetting that I was supposed to be at work, that I was supposed to be chairing a meeting of the Norman Antiquities Sub-committee that very morning, I found myself some 45 minutes later driving slowly along the street where Ginger's house was. In my pocket, £3,000 in 50s.

And, as if in a dream that I had had before, I found myself seeing what I half-expected to see. Ginger's house was boarded up. I drew up outside and put my head in my hands. It couldn't be, it just couldn't. The greatest opportunity of my career, of my whole life – I couldn't have just thrown it away by posting a simple letter.

Then I was angry. Getting the little hub-cap crowbar from the boot of my car I strode up to the stained sheet of old fibre-board that had been nailed over the doorway of the house and set furiously to work trying to lever it off. It came away slowly, one nail at a time as I worked my way frantically around it, heaving and groaning as I went. Then it was loose, and with a hard thrust of my foot I splintered the door frame beside the lock and the door burst in. Pushing the sagging door out of my way I rushed inside. The downstairs room was bare. I ran up the stairs, pulling myself up on the light-blue bannister with all my strength, and in a moment I was outside the room where I had seen all the surveillance equipment. The "eye" symbol on the door had gone. My heart racing, I pulled open the door and went in. There was little or no light coming through the boarded windows, yet I knew without seeing it that this room was empty too. I had made it happen when I posted the letter.

The wind had been knocked out of me, and I sank to my knees in the hollow, airless room.

When I got to my feet again I took my penlight keyring from my pocket. The tiny torch cast a feeble beam,

but it was enough for me to pick out the cobwebs that festooned the place. The room didn't look as if it had been used for months. I pulled my fingers through a dusty web – it seemed real enough. But it had to be a trick of some kind.

Heavily, I went back down into the street. The next front door along was open and two girls were outside – that house was still lived in, at least. One of the girls – she looked about 15 or 16 – was lying on the ground, her flowery summer dress dragging in the dirt. When she saw me she sat up and leant with her back to the wall beside the door.

I stared at her for a moment, then – the rational part of me still refusing to be defeated – I asked: "Have you seen the man who lives here?"

"He's got red hair," the girl said as if she were chanting the words of a song.

"Take no notice of her, she sees things what aren't there. She isn't right in t' head."

It was the younger girl who had spoken, an immature version of the other, though dressed in jeans and a tee-shirt portraying a heavy-metal band. She couldn't have been more than eight, but was looking from her sister back to me with worried eyes.

"But this man," I said, "she says she's seen him...?"

The young girl shook her head in disbelief, much as an adult might. "No one lives there. Though she reckons she's seen him. I've never seen him though. I thought she was making it up."

During the next couple of weeks I went back to Ginger's house several times. But nothing had changed there. I even knocked on the door of the sisters, but there was no answer there either. An invitation from the Institute for the meeting I wanted arrived, but what could I tell them now?

And that might have been the end of it but for something that happened to me early one morning about a month after I last saw Ginger. I was lying in bed, taking it easy after the alarm clock had gone off. I had to get up to get ready for work, but feeling loath to leave the warmth of my bed – as I had many times since I posted the letter – I rested for some ten or 15 minutes with my eyes half-closed, going over in my mind all the things I had to do that day. Trying to forget what might have been... Suddenly I was compelled to act. I shot up out of bed and rushed over to my wardrobe. Flinging the doors wide, I tore aside the row of clothes on their hangers, then finding nothing behind them, I swept out onto the floor the boxes, books and bits and pieces that occupied the base of the wardrobe.

I stood amongst the clutter I had created for minutes at a time, pondering...

For as I had lain resting in bed trying to concentrate on what had become a meaningless career, I had seen something. Through the gap between the unclosed wardrobe doors I had clearly seen a face watching me, a face with ginger brows and piercing yellow-green eyes...

Lawrence Dyer wrote "The Four-Thousand-Year-Old Boy" (*Interzone* 73) and "Slugs and Snails and Puppy Dogs' Tails" (*IZ* 86). He lives in Leek, Staffordshire, has written copiously for the small press and is also busy running *The Third Alternative's* website (<http://members.aol.com/ttaldyer/index.html>).

So, I confessed to David Pringle that I might miss my next deadline, one reason being the ongoing distraction of America's peculiar constitutional crisis, and he responded, "Why not try to take some kind of science-fiction angle on the Clinton thing?"

Although writers should always be attentive to editorial directives, taking a "science-fiction angle" on this affair first suggested a traditional, and dreary, approach: the critic says, "Ho hum. You see, we science-fiction readers are utterly bored by this Clinton business, because science fiction long ago predicted the emergence of a relentlessly intrusive, media-dominated, scandal-driven society." And a few texts are cited — here, Norman Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron* comes to mind — as uncannily accurate anticipations of the event.

One problem with such arguments is that they reveal a longstanding contradiction in science-fiction commentaries. On the one hand, when someone criticizes science fiction for failing to predict some obvious development, the aficionado sniffs and answers, "That's irrelevant. Science fiction is not a literature of prediction." On the other hand, when a science-fiction prediction is spectacularly realized, the aficionado smugly smiles and says, "We predicted that. Aren't we smart?" And science fiction cannot have it both ways, refusing to accept blame for its predictive failures while trying to capitalize on its predictive successes.

The broader problem involves the difference between what a few scattered science-fiction stories have predicted — which, after thoroughgoing research, inevitably turns out to be virtually everything, naturally including the Clinton-Lewinsky contretemps — and what the common voice of the entire genre almost universally predicted — which was a future radically different than the one we now inhabit.

Consider, for example, Arthur C. Clarke's *The Lost Worlds of 2001*, which included information about the whereabouts of the *Discovery* crew at the time, not distant from today, when they were summoned to the mission: David Bowman, observing Mars from Phobos; Peter Whitehead, working on the surface of Mercury; Victor Kaminski, orbiting a thousand miles above Venus; William Hunter, in an experimental boat near the Great Barrier Reef; Jack Kimball, high above Earth in geosynchronous orbit; Kelvin Poole, in an underwater laboratory near Bimini.

This was the world we were promised, 30 years after reaching the Moon: humans in outer space, on other planets, under the sea, living and working in strange new realms. Had these predictions come true, life today would be different in innum-

Unlucky Starr and the Omission of Venus

Gary Westfahl

able ways. Of course, there would be reports of new discoveries and scientific breakthroughs, but there would be much more than that: human-interest stories about the first grandmother on the Moon, colleges adding Space Science majors to prepare students for new professions, soap-opera subplots about ex-lovers going to Space Station One as a device to explain the absence of departing actors, the insufferable neighbour boring everyone with photos of her nephew on Mars, giant tomatoes grown in microgravity as a novel delicacy in supermarkets, and so on. In obvious and subtle ways, the vastly expanded range of human environments would significantly alter all aspects of our existence.

As we know, such predictions of life in 2001 now represent, at best, a strong possibility for life in 2101; yet humanity is not visibly suffering from its lack of progress in conquering the universe. This undermines the contention of space advocates that a desire to travel is a fundamental human drive, so that our failure to vigorously move into space represents a shameful stifling of our basic nature. Yet I elsewhere argued that no such drive exists, given the persistently sedentary habits of most humans throughout most of history; and the current absence of any great clamouring for human ventures into space seems to support my thesis. Sure, a hundred thousand Americans have signed up for the first commercial flight into space, but that leaves

250 million Americans who have expressed no interest in catching that flight.

Still, I believe there is a fundamental human desire for new information, which often provokes travel. And the real problem caused by our arrested advance into space is our thwarted curiosity: lacking new environments to inhabit, we also lack new information.

Nonsense! one might retort: with regular habitation of near-orbital space, space probes to other planets, and advanced telescopes, we have gained more new data about the universe in the past 30 years than in the past 3,000 years. That's true. But the human desire for new information has a parochial tinge: as people, we are especially interested in other people, and we like our new information to involve, or somehow relate to, other people. Thomas Jefferson could have requested some research to learn about the Louisiana Territory he had purchased; but he wanted to send two people he knew, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, to conduct a personal investigation and provide a personal report. While in Europe, my parents did not merely wish to photograph all its famous sights; they (alas!) wanted to photograph every single sight with their children posing in front of them. Among extinct animals, dinosaurs receive the most attention because they are the only ancient creatures who might have given humans some real competition, and non-fictional and fictional speculations invariably feature imagined juxtapositions of dinosaurs and people.

So there is a simple reason why Pathfinder photographs of Mars, or Hubble pictures of space phenomena, attract little public attention: they include no images of dear old Aunt Bertha, waving at us in the foreground. However impressive our burgeoning knowledge of the universe may be, it lacks the human touch; hence, the public turns elsewhere to satisfy its curiosity.

If there are no new sorts of people to examine — oceanauts, Martians, whatever — people will stare more intently at old sorts of people, seeking new information there. Attempting to account for the Clinton crisis, I recall not any science-fiction story but Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*. Originally the photographer played by James Stewart was an ordinary person with an ordinary amount of curiosity; but, confined to his apartment by injury and unable to leave, he began to constantly and obsessively observe all his neighbours, trying to find out as much as he could about their private lives.

That is our situation: first promised unlimited access to new environments, but finding ourselves indefinitely confined to planet Earth after all, we begin to constantly and obses-

sively observe all our neighbours, trying to find out as much we can about them. Unable to explore the cosmos, we poke around in closets. Human curiosity, even if misdirected, must be satisfied; new information, even if inconsequential, must be obtained.

And information is a powerful addictive drug; once hooked on a stream of data, we never want it to be cut off. After one American presidential candidate made his income tax forms public, to show he had nothing to hide, a pattern was established, and candidates were soon *expected* to release their forms, so an inquisitive public could find out how much money they made, how much they contributed to charity, etc. Now, the rare candidate who resists pressure to release that data engenders dark suspicions about financial shenanigans. So it is absurd to hope, like some pious commentators, that the American media and public, repulsed by disclosures about the sex lives of Clinton and his adversaries, will henceforth resolve to rebuild the firewall between private life and public life and suppress embarrassing personal information. Rather, a pattern has been established, journalists are presently poised to investigate and publicize all the secret sins of errant politicians, and the masses are ready to absorb each sordid detail.

Not only politicians will confront assaults on their privacy: Clinton allies have hinted that journalists lambasting the President may see their own scandalous pasts revealed; the role of the *paparazzi* and tabloid press in tormenting celebrities hardly needs mention; and American businesses, with the support of the courts, have become increasingly nosy in demanding personal information about the people they interview and hire. Everybody wants to learn more about everybody else, and they are being allowed to do exactly that.

However, this leads to other problems. Tradition suggests that if we observe something carefully and intently enough, we will learn absolutely everything about it. In the words of Jack Webb playing Joe Friday, often cited by his disciple Kenneth Starr, determined investigation always leads to "the facts." Yet modern science tells us this simply isn't so. Given our innate propensity to observe patterns, humans may detect non-existent patterns in random occurrences. Some information is unobtainable; some fuzzy lines, examined more and more closely, look fuzzier, not clearer. After exhaustive investigation, probers may be just as uncertain as they were at the beginning, or even more uncertain. The Clinton scandal may hinge upon unanswerable questions: at what exact point does helping a young woman become an attempt to

influence her possible testimony? What exactly is the difference between making misleading statements under oath and committing perjury? Unfortunately, the line between stupidity and criminality can be as complex and infinitely convoluted as the Mandelbrot Set.

Thwarted in their efforts to obtain complete, definite truth, investigators may refuse to accept the essential irresolvability of key questions and reach a different conclusion: that somebody is *preventing* them from finding the truth. Starr did not begin as a rabidly partisan Republican determined to destroy a Democratic president; however, in the data he

*Everybody wants
to learn more
about everybody
else, and they are
being allowed to
do exactly that.*

gathered he discerned a pattern of criminal behaviour on Clinton's part, he found himself unable to prove it was true, and he became convinced that his inability to obtain proof stemmed from Clinton's infuriating efforts to obstruct justice. Starr thus epitomizes the potentially unhappy results of efforts to obsessively observe our fellow humans: we see patterns that aren't really there, fail to get definite answers, and come to suspect that evil forces are deliberately frustrating our efforts to get definite answers. In a word, we become paranoid.

While a reference to *The X-Files* might offer proof enough of the problem, that programme at least ventures far enough into the fantastic that no one can reasonably construe its wild stories as a serious attempt to explain the world's mysteries as the work of malevolent aliens allied with chain-smoking quislings secretly controlling the government (though some viewers apparently believe exactly that). But more mundane conspiracy theories are increasingly abundant. Watching a documentary about Princess Diana's death with an animated recreation of the fateful drive into the tunnel of deadly columns, I felt a strange sense of *déjà vu*. Then it hit me: I had often seen similar ani-

mated sequences recreating the final drive of President Kennedy down that freeway, beneath that Book Depository, and past that grassy knoll. For 35 years, a legion of obsessed investigators have endeavoured to prove the Kennedy assassination was the work of malevolent conspirators; yet while they have developed intriguing theories and turned up tons of suggestive data, they have failed to provide any definite proof. But they're still trying, harder than ever. Now, with the death of Diana – which suspiciously occurred right before her announced engagement and involved a mysterious chauffeur purportedly linked to international spy networks – Britain may have its own equivalent of the Kennedy assassination, an event to suck up decades of investigative energy with no prospect of definitive answers.

Paranoia also infests the fringes of the Clinton investigation: an e-mail message now circulating lists numerous friends and associates of Clinton who committed suicide or died in accidents, sometimes just when they were reportedly ready to talk to the authorities. The implication is that Clinton has assembled teams of assassins to eliminate anyone who might expose his criminal deeds. However, even ignoring the fact that this super-efficient conspiracy inexplicably failed to deal with Clinton foes like Starr, Newt Gingrich, Linda Tripp and Monica Lewinsky, we must realize that Clinton, in decades of public life, has had thousands of friends and associates, the vast majority of whom died peacefully in their sleep or survived to the present day. Still, Clinton haters are convinced they have seen a pattern, even if it has no more meaning than the faces one begins to see after staring at dots on the wall.

Overall, the pattern I discern is not a pretty picture: frustrated by our inability to enter new frontiers and learn about new sorts of personal experiences, we turn our insatiable curiosity on the people around us, determined to learn more and more about them; we learn some things probably better left unknown; and when we cannot learn everything, we begin to imagine even more unflattering things. No doubt there are many reasons for our increasing descent into a world of mutual prying, probing and paranoia, and during the unending coverage of the Clinton crisis, each and every one of them will surely be brought up and discussed. But I still suspect that if the predictions of science fiction had come true, and if people were now inhabiting various parts of the solar system, engaged in the greatest expansion of the human environment ever achieved, we would all be paying a little less attention to a semen-stained dress.

Gary Westfahl

The *auteur* theory of film-analysis attempts to overcome the manifest fact that directors have to work with pre-existing scripts by insisting that no matter what raw material might come to hand the cinematic *auteur* will always superimpose upon it his own distinctive pattern of pre-conceptions and concerns. To be an *auteur* is to be able to make all stories into the same story – and to call film directors *auteurs* implies that that is what actual authors routinely do. It is not entirely clear why any author who could choose to do otherwise would want to tell the same story over and over again, but there undoubtedly are some writers who are so utterly enraptured and captivated by a single theme that it recurs constantly within their work. Christopher Priest is one of them, and *The Extremes* (Simon & Schuster, £16.99) is aptly titled in more ways than one, because it carefully and methodically extrapolates his particular *idée fixe* to its furthest and most clearly-delineated extreme.

The story which recurs throughout Priest's work is that of an individual bruised by the real world who finds some kind of relief or solace in an alternative: the Inverted World, the Dream Archipelago, Wessex, the dimension of invisibility opened by the Glamour, etc, etc. Although the alternative mode of existence is initially perceived as something clearly distinct from the everyday world, its palliative possibilities gradually become more obvious and more seductive, until the boundary between the subjective and the objective begins to blur, opening up an opportunity for the bruised individual to re-create a kind of wholeness within himself or herself. From Priest's viewpoint, the fact of the boundary's disturbance has always been far more important than the mechanics of the violation, so he has never seen any essential difference between science fiction, fantasy and dramas of disturbed psychology and has ranged freely across that spectrum, with a wholly appropriate and understandable reluctance to be pigeon-holed. There is, however, a sense in which all his works in this vein are, *ipso facto*, dealing with some form of Virtual Reality, and the fact that actual technologies of Virtual Reality are now being developed and used must have exerted a powerful attraction upon him, drawing him back from the calculated illusiveness of *The Prestige* towards materialistic extrapolations of utilitarian hardware. The furthest extreme of this line of thought was always likely to lie within the purview of clever computers and synthesized experience.

The protagonist of *The Extremes* is Teresa Simmons, an English-born FBI agent. She has been recently widowed under curious circum-

The Art of Self-Maintenance

Brian Stableford

stances; her husband Andy, a fellow agent, was involved in a project which applied the data-sifting abilities of computers to a search for hidden patterns in massacre-events of the type which has become increasingly common in the USA and has been echoed in such innocuous British locations as Hungerford and Dunblane. Andy Simmons's curiosity led him to the scene of one such event in a Texan town, where he was shot by a gunman named Aronwitz. At exactly the same time, a gunman named Grove was carrying out a similar series of murders in a small English seaside resort named Bulverton, and Teresa elects to take her compassionate leave in Bulverton, tacitly carrying forward her husband's work by searching for a seemingly-impossible explanatory link. The paradoxical quality of this quest

ultimately becomes painfully clear to her:

It was impossible to accept the metaphysics of coincidence in an ordered universe, because only by believing that the emergence of killers like Aronwitz and Grove were random events could you ever come to terms with what they had done...

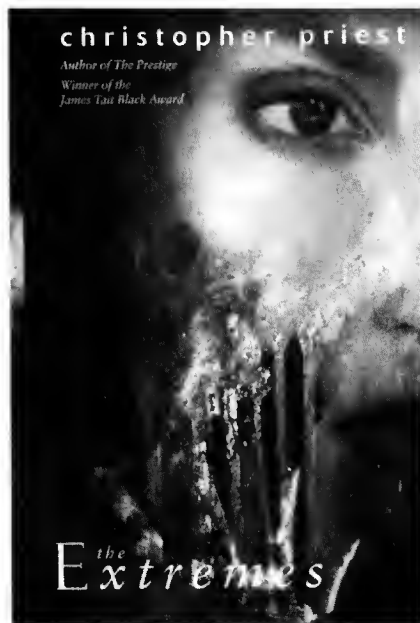
To think that they were part of some pattern that could be understood and interpreted, and therefore predicted, made reality less real. (pp 198-199)

Teresa's FBI training has included the study of many such massacre events, employing virtual-reality software which places its users at the scene, as witness, victim or murderer, with sufficient freedom of action to alter the unfolding scenario. Similar software is being peddled as a commercial product under the label ExEx (for Extreme Experience), and is even available in Bulverton. Teresa begins using it as a resource in her unofficial research without at first realizing the significance of the fact that the Bulverton mass-murderer interrupted his killing spree with a visit to the Bulverton ExEx facility – thus posing a problem for the programmers entrusted with building a virtual reconstruction of the event. The programmers in question are resentful of Teresa's presence in the town lest her inquiries generate another kind of "feedback" into the witness-accounts they are endeavouring to capture and collate. Further "hyperlinks" are created within the ExEx computers by their users as they create new versions of scenarios, and within the users' own minds as they integrate ExEx sequences into their own streams of conscious experience. It is hardly surprising that as Teresa's questions and hypotheses become intricately looped

BOOKS



REVIEWED



and knotted, the complexity of her own experiences makes it increasingly difficult for her to separate the subjective and the objective.

There are, of course, other writers who have become intensely preoccupied with the breakdown of distinctions between the subjective and the objective. Robert Pirsig even went so far as to make that erasure the allegedly-heroic purpose of his vapid cod-philosophical extravaganzas *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Perhaps because of his long love-hate relationship with commercial science fiction, Priest has always taken a more hard-headedly rationalistic view of the issue than other writers of a similar stripe. He has always been an unusually meticulous writer, intellectually as well as aesthetically rigorous in the construction of his characters and plots, and *The Extremes* reaps the benefit of all his experience in this regard.

Most characters lost in mazes like the one which confronts and claims Teresa Simmons – and I doubt that there has ever been another quite so fiendishly complex – either come apart under the strain, reconcile themselves to being hopelessly lost forever, or avail themselves of a convenient *deus ex machina* laid on by a desperate *auteur*. Teresa and her *auteur* are made of sterner and more ingenious stuff, and they make a far better fist of negotiating their way to the heart of the labyrinth than any rival I have encountered. Teresa's odyssey is mapped with the minutest care, and her personality is established with similar scrupulousness in order that the reader can be with her every step of the way. The existential vertigo which grips her when she realizes, reluctantly, that she has lost her way between the imaginary and the real, is communicated to the reader with consummate skill and considerable impact – and her response is tactically brilliant as well as authentically heroic.

One reason, of course, why authors become and contentedly remain *auteurs* is because they have found a problem which needs elaborate study and careful reiteration if it is ever to be satisfactorily worked through. It remains to be seen whether Priest is completely satisfied with this particular version of his own most oft-told story, but it is undoubtedly his best yet, and no one coming to the theme for the first time could possibly have wrought such a *tour de force*.

Hunting Down the Motive

The science-fictional murder mystery is a difficult sub-genre to work within because its hybrid nature routinely subjects its products to the danger of falling between two widely-spaced stools of reader expectation. Mystery fans are often unhappy with sf variants because sf licenses a flexibility of the limits of the possible which seems to them too convenient by half. Science fiction fans are often unhappy with whodunits because the problem of who committed a particular murder may well seem trivial when set against a background of awesome technological and social change. The hybrid does, however, have a vigour of its own, which is only partly expressed in the ingenuity which its best exponents deploy in setting up puzzles whose solutions are tightly bound by pre-established premises. A further dimension of virtuosity is contained in the manner in which the investigations of an sf detective serve to reveal not merely the identity, method and motive of the murderer but also the complexity and social implications of the technologies involved in its commission.

In order to accomplish this broader revelation, it helps if the detective does not know very much about the world into which he or she is pitched, so that the reader can share the learning experience. In Pat Cadigan's *Tea from an Empty Cup* (Voyager, £5.99; Tor, \$22.95) Dore Konstantin is confronted with a murder committed in a Virtual Reality Parlour where VR-addicts don "hotsuits" in order to project themselves into such shared milieux as post-Apocalyptic Noo Yawk Sitty. In order to investigate possible motives – and, eventually, possible methods of an extraordinary kind – she must make her first forays into that strange alternative universe, and to the even stranger ones which are within and

beyond it. In the title story of Peter F. Hamilton's *A Second Chance at Eden* (Macmillan, £17.99) – which would have counted as a full-length novel ten years ago, although it is a mere minnow by comparison with the whale-like units of Hamilton's record-breaking "Night's Dawn" trilogy – Harvey Parfitt has only just taken up a new appointment as security chief of the prototypic space habitat of Eden when the director of the Genetics Division is shot in the head by a servitor chimp which ought to have been incapable of carrying out any such crime. Like Dore Konstantin, Parfitt must cross a vital existential threshold in order to investigate the crime properly, following the example set by almost everyone else in Eden in being fitted with an Affinity link which enables him to make quasi-telepathic contact with Eden's omnipresent Artificial Intelligence, and thus with everyone else similarly linked.

Although both stories are ostensibly focused on the question of *how* the murders were committed – and, in that respect, constitute wholly adequate exercises in ingenious plotting – both heroes remain sharply conscious of the fact that the real question before them is *why*. Hamilton, being a writer of a more traditional stripe than Cadigan, is perfectly prepared to throw in a small mountain of gold and an ambitious robber, but is now a sufficiently conscientious writer to recognize that such a device would be inherently anticlimactic were it not deployed as a mere feint. (Hamilton has obviously learned from the experience of "Escape Route," the second longest story in the book, in which an epoch-making discovery is brusquely and anticlimactically cancelled out by a casual shoot-'em-up plot borrowed from a B-movie thriller.) Cadigan's VR-streetwise characters pour contemptuous scorn on such worn-out devices at every

possible opportunity as they subject Dore Konstantin and the secondary protagonist, Yuki Harame, to a crash course in the new politics of ambition. Although robbery is certainly number one of the list of possible motives until the final thrust and riposte of *Tea from an Empty Cup*, that which seems to have been stolen is nothing so crude as mere metal.

A further requirement of the truly conscientious sf detective story is

Pat Cadigan (right) and her mother at the launch party for *Tea from an Empty Cup*.



that solving the case is more of a beginning than an end. The protagonist's explorations must, by virtue of their science-fictional nature, lead to something more significant than the righting of a wrong: the detective himself, or herself, must be brought by the investigation to a significant existential crossroads. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, who can always return to the cosy interior of 221B Baker Street content in the knowledge that his world is changeless, the sf detective must decide what adaptation is required to the new possibilities revealed and dramatized by the solved crime. This is a point at which almost all actual sf detective stories chicken out, for the fairly good reason that careful writers know that they might need to call upon their detectives again, and cannot allow them any kind of permanently-significant transcendence of their role.

Cadigan takes care of this problem by using the secondary protagonist, whose separate adventure forms an intriguing counterplot to Dore Kon-

stantin's plot, then provides the means for the author to release the detective from ideative bondage while hurling her *doppelgänger* further into the unknown. Hamilton carefully equips the dutiful Harvey Parfitt with a devout wife who takes a very serious view of the Pope's edict that Affinity is unholy, so that when his family is faced with the choice of further existential evolution in partnership with the augmented Eden he feels compelled to return to Earth with her, leaving the task of furthering progress to his happily-enlightened children.

Both of these stories are clever and readable, constituting fine examples of their hybrid kind (and it ought to be noted, too, that "A Second Chance at Eden" is a marked improvement on the other six stories included in the Hamilton collection, whose stepwise progress illustrates how far the author has come in a short space of time and hold a great deal of promise for the future). Each of them demonstrates, in its own particular fashion, how little mysteries can be made to

serve as hooks on which grandiose themes might be hung. There is, however, one important difference between them which raises yet another interesting question about the quality of the sub-genre. In *Tea from an Empty Cup* Dore Konstantin reacts exactly as a good cop is supposed to react when she gets her man: she arrests him, triumphantly relating the list of charges she has to bring against him. Harvey Parfitt reacts very differently, making his own judgment of what is – by virtue of its motive, if not its method – a wholly unprecedented action.

Even conventional murder mysteries sometimes challenge our notions of exactly what might constitute justifiable homicide, but science-fiction murder mysteries are virtually obliged to do so – and that might be seen as the greatest of all their virtues, even if their readers may feel (as I happen to feel in respect of *A Second Chance at Eden*) that they have got the answer wrong.

Brian Stableford

Like a coral reef, the sf genre builds on what has gone before by a slow but steady process of accretion. Big new ideas, striking out in a new direction or forming a startlingly new geometry, erupt only occasionally, and are soon absorbed into the communal structure. The last big idea was cyberpunk, of course, and its absorption into the sf corpus was accelerated by the spread of Internet culture. To write about virtual reality now is not to speculate wildly but merely to parody or burlesque what already exists. With the right attitude, these parodies or comic infernos can of course be both funny and apt, *vide* Neil Stephenson's *Snowcrash*, Bruce Bethke's *Headcrash*, or Pat Cadigan's *Tea From an Empty Cup*, but just as blasters, intelligent dolphins, hyperdrives and tractor beams have been so thoroughly absorbed into the sf corpus that they can be deployed without explanation or exposition, so the tropes of cyberpunk are suffering a similar sea-change. What was once a simple and elegant metaphor has become baroquely overgrown, as crusty as a web site littered with Java beans, eye candy that looks good but adds nothing to the content. One might think of it in terms of the increasing baroque-ness of Victorian design, where pleats and ruffles and other decorations disguised what the thingmajig actually did. While they each have their virtues, the first three novels under discussion all display signs of this overwrought over-decoration.

Melissa Scott's *The Shape of Their Hearts* (Tor, \$22.95), for instance, is a good old-fashioned tale of interplanetary intrigue all gussied

up with cyberstuff trimmings which often obscure the virtues of a simple but strong story – but more of that in a moment. Let's get the plot out of the way first.

The planet Idun has been colonized by religious fanatics, the Seeking Children, with a rump of non-believers uncomfortably confined to an island close to the spaceport. The Children's leader committed suicide to expiate their sins, but not before encoding his personality in an evolving and self-aware computer program, the Memoriant, which the Children believe to contain his final revelations. To enter the cyberspace controlled by the Memoriant is to enter an arena and go head-to-head with God. A scaled-down version of the Memoriant has been implicated in the assassination of a political leader on the planet Jericho, and Dr Anton Tso, a clone and trader who has links with Idun, has been assigned the task of going there to obtain a true copy of the program and bring it out through an embargo. Soon enough, he and his artificial-person bodyguard are out of their depths. Tso is kidnapped and forced to interface with the Memoriant; his

bodyguard must rely on local police, who have their own agenda, to try and save her boss.

While this story, narrated by someone with inside knowledge whose role only slowly becomes apparent, might be the beginning of an sf thriller, here it's an end to itself. Scott seems more interested in metaphysics than plot, and even more interested in the mechanics of her future's version of cyberspace and virtual reality. So while *The Shape of Their Hearts* is vibrant, complex and imaginative, it is also crammed with details that clog the plot much as fluff clogs the teeth of a clock's gear train. It isn't enough that characters enter cyberspace; we must be given every detail of the routines, subroutines, icons and architecture which they manipulate, so that we seem always to be viewing the world through the wrong end of the telescope.

As a thriller, *The Shape of Their Hearts* is so top-heavy with detail it barely gets off the ground before it's brought to a summary halt; as an explication of the metaphysics of artificial intelligence and identity, it sketches out its agenda with a couple of object lessons, but has no time to apply them. Strip away the thick coating of cyberstuff, and you're left with a well-written but heavily truncated story, and left wondering why, given the heavy emphasis on artificial reality, it had to be set on another planet at all.

Laura J. Mixon's new novel, *Prox-Lies* (Tor, \$24.95), is an ambitious and complex updating of one of the few sf tropes to have made it out into the wide world. It's some time in the next century, and civilization is barely coping with the effects of

Wrought Over

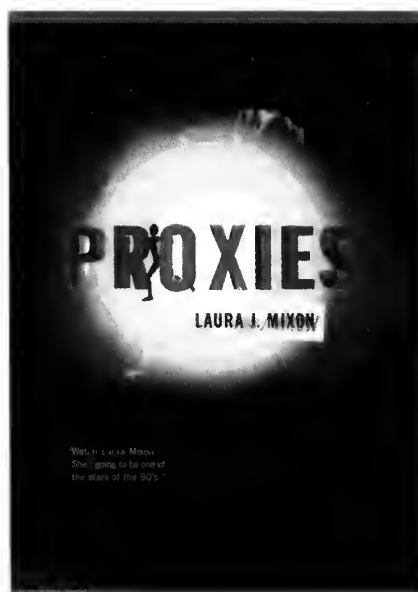
Paul J. McAuley

global warming on the Earth's climate and ecosystems. NASA has built a starship that will pave the way for an escape from the end of the world. And a renegade scientist, Patricia Taylor, has developed a method of enhancing the effectiveness of operators of proxies, human-like remotely operated robots. Like the Bionic Man, the proxies are faster, stronger and more invulnerable than humans, and could be invaluable in dangerous environments like space. But Taylor's methods involve experimenting on children, and she wants to steal the starship to escape with her pseudo-family before the government discovers what is really going on.

And then complications ensue, in a big and sometimes unwieldy story that's complicated further by the use of multiple narrative viewpoints. Carni D'Auber, a scientist involved in NASA's interstellar programme and daughter of a US Senator, is caught up in the plot because Taylor needs her expertise in faster-than-light communications systems. Daniel Sornsen, a proxy operator who is part of a government group allied with Taylor's research but unaware of her plans for the starship, tries to help Carni. Meanwhile, an odd pair of twins in Taylor's group have their own plans (their precise relationship is pivotal to the novel's ending, so I won't reveal it; suffice it to say that Nixon resorts to typographical trickery to try and convey it). And a renegade operator unsure of her own identity has taken control of a proxy and is causing havoc.

Mixon's future, conveyed nicely through her various viewpoints, is richly detailed and diverse – a little too detailed in places, for like Melissa Scott, Nixon is possessed by a kind of Gernsbackian obsession with technical specifics – and her extrapolative riffs around the uses and functions of the proxies are convincing. In particular, there's a terrific rescue-in-space sequence, and the dance of characters through the various proxy bodies is spookily effective. The absence of an authorial voice able to tuck all the loose ends in place means that, particularly in the first half of the novel, the reader must work very hard to make sense of what's going on through the flat reportage of the partial viewpoints of the various characters, but the ending, although imbued with a touch too much soap-opera melodrama revolving around Taylor's role as the Evil Fake Mother, and shuffling through increasingly short scenes as Nixon tries to keep her various narrative balls on the fly, does pay back the slow and detailed build up. One to watch out for.

The world has already ended in Wil McCarthy's *Bloom* (Del Rey, \$23.95). The Mycosystem, which con-



sists of billions of self-replicating biological machines, has absorbed and transformed all life on Earth, and taken over Mars and Venus, too, leaving a few human refugees to eke out a living in the outer Solar System. The scenario of humans struggling to make a living after having been dispossessed of the Earth is hardly new – it was at the heart of John Varley's 1970s *Eight Worlds* sequence, and both Bruce Sterling and Michael Swanwick recycled it in *Schismatrix* and *Vacuum Flowers* – while the concept of the Mycosystem echoes Greg Bear's *Blood Music*. No matter: for much of the novel McCarthy invests these borrowed ideas with a fresh energy, and adds a few new ones of his own. Only towards the end does the reader grow uneasy.

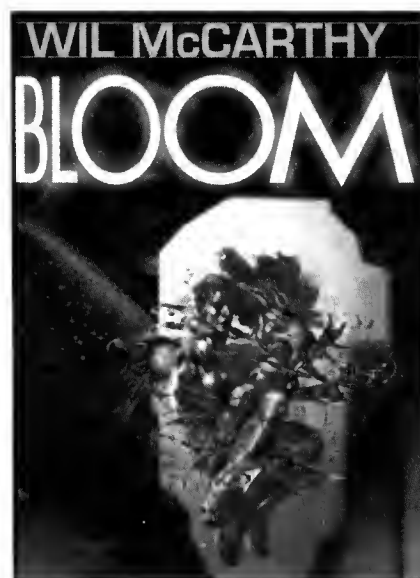
John Strasheim, the narrator, is a citizen of the Immunity, which invests much of its energy in rigorously protecting habitats scattered among Jupiter's moons from spaceborne Mycosystem spores, and plans to launch a starship so that humanity might have a chance to start anew elsewhere. Strasheim, by trade a cob-

bler but by inclination an historian, and an expert on the struggle against the Mycosystem, is recruited to accompany the crew of an experimental ship, the *Louis Pasteur*, into the inner reaches of the Solar System. There's a desperate need to attempt to learn more about the Mycosystem, for it seems that humans are now coexisting with it on Earth and Mars and Venus.

It is a voyage of a ship of fools: someone, perhaps an agent of the Temple of Transcendent Evolution, tries to sabotage it from the very beginning; the captain has an implanted sense of humour which erupts at inappropriate moments; the novel immune systems which coat the hull are not as impregnable as believed. The narrative racks along nicely enough, and is crammed with colourful scenes which recall sf's crude but vigorous pulp antecedents (in particular, there's a wonderful scene set in a market in microgravity inside an asteroid), while McCarthy enjoyably sends up his stiff-necked yet good-hearted hero. The complexity of the Mycosystem is nicely evoked, and there are some tasty nuggets of speculation about artificial life. And yet, although the *Louis Pasteur* plunges through the heart of the Mycosystem and its crew are given what appears to be a revelation, the narrative suddenly runs dry. While we might expect the revelation to be the launch pad for some piece of transcendence or at least a transforming epiphany which might invest it in meaning, the whole thing sputters out and loose plot ends are quickly wound up in a perfunctory final chapter. Sadly, *Bloom* fades long before it should.

The three novels so far discussed spring straight from the heart of sf, written by those who breath its air and know its gravity. But *Inhuman Beings* (Ace, \$13), Jerry Jay Carroll's second novel, is sf written from the outside in, blending two familiar tropes, a *noir* private-detective setting and a story of alien invasion in a fast-paced tale of urban paranoia. Its narrator, Goodwin Armstrong (now you *know* he has to be a hero) begins his story in a maximum-security cell, the worst serial killer ever captured by the FBI. The first half the novel is about how he got there.

A wearily cynical divorced ex-cop turned private investigator living in San Francisco, Armstrong finds that his business is being undercut by a smart new computerized firm, Security Concerns. Desperate for work, he takes on a psychic, Princess Dulay, as a client, even though he scoffs at her story of aliens invading the Earth through possession of humans. But when he starts to investigate her claims, things start to get weird: the fleapit hotel in which he is rooming burns down in a blue flash of light; security and traffic cameras start to watch him; Princess Dulay's psychic



friends are murdered one by one. Then Princess Dulay and a teenage hacker Armstrong employs are both killed, and Armstrong finds himself at war with Security Concerns and on the run from the FBI. Luckily for him, the latter capture him; even more luckily, someone believes his story and lets him out just as the alien influence begins to spread across the country.

The elements of the plot are clichés, of course, one part Dashiell Hammett to two parts *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (the 1978 remake with Donald Sutherland) and *The Puppet Masters* (the movie rather than the novel), and the development, in which Armstrong is transformed from world-weary PI to Rambo, is a trifle over-wrought, but Carroll's mordant humour, breezy vernacular style, fine characterization and carefully paced build-up keep the pages turning. What's interesting (and perhaps worrying) is that here is a new sf writer whose influences are not the accepted canon of the field, but movie and TV sci-fi. In particular, Carroll shares with media sf a peculiar blithe attitude to science. Any explanation will do as long as it can be rattled off quickly enough and doesn't get in the way of the plot, a carelessness that at one point has someone saying that a teaspoonful of the stuff which black holes are made of weighs as much as the Earth (he means neutron stars, of course, not black holes, which strictly speaking aren't made of anything).

Well, you could say that it's a minor point, and that the science in a lot of straight-down-the-middle genre sf is often just as dodgy, but in genre sf

the science is at least the point of the story. Here, skimpy rationalization and doubletalk leave the aliens as a shadowy unexplained menace which is, in the end, removed offscreen. And while it's nice to see old sf themes reinvigorated and set in well-rendered and smartly observed contemporaneity, one can't help thinking of pod people, and shivering.

Let's turn at last to Garry Kilworth, a skilful narrator who knows exactly how to stir the narrative pot to keep it on the boil, and who knows all the reefs and rocks of the fantasy genre through which he steers his story. *Land-of-Mists* (Orbit, £16.99) is the last volume of his *The Navigator Kings* trilogy, an epic set in a magical Polynesia where the pantheon of animistic gods and demons have a direct effect on human lives and Britain (the Land-of-Mists) is substituted for New Zealand (which lies elsewhere, and had considerable relevance in the second volume). Told in a deceptively simple, unornamented, demotic style reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Navigator Kings* is an intricate multi-generational saga in which the fantastic is as commonplace as the miracles of navigation by which the Polynesian peoples established their scattered civilization.

Keito, a hero of humble origin, has now turned his ambition towards the Land-of-Mists, despite the advice of Seumas, his old friend and a Pictish refugee. The warfleet sets sail, with Prince Duggan and his sorceress wife Siko jealously scheming against Keito, and supernatural forces gath-

ering around it. For this is a multi-levelled story of a clash between two worlds: between the Polynesians and the Picts, and between the gods of the two cultures; and between nature and the supernatural. Seumas's Polynesian wife dies, and in a desperate attempt to regain her, the old warrior succumbs to Siko's wiles. In the Land-of-Mists, his son, Craig, truly a child of both worlds, must confront a cruel enemy, a legacy of Seumas's history. Douglass Barelegs, the son of a man Seumas killed before he fled the Land-of-Mists and of the woman who pursued Seumas and came to love him, has sworn to avenge the death of his father and the loss of his mother. While the Polynesians fight against the Picts, a war authentically depicted with much casual cruelty and low humour, so the gods of the different peoples fight each other, and, pursued by Douglass, Craig stumbles upon something that will forever change the world.

Kilworth draws the net of his story tight and true. His characters are both believably heroic and believably flawed; the complex culture of the Polynesians is admirably evoked and the interaction of the world and its gods and spirits is executed with a casual yet precise playfulness; one can even forgive the deliberately outrageous *deus ex machina*. Here's a story imbued with those old-fashioned yet necessary virtues of craft and cunning that exactly meets its ambition, and does so with a glad rush that carries the reader along with it.

Paul J. McAuley

Usually, when a writer's been at it for a long time, we have a good idea what to expect. Then, if he's still writing well, we say he has a distinctive voice and style; if he's gone off, we say he's gone stale and is repeating himself. Poul Anderson has definitely not gone off, but those who know his work well will find some familiar tropes in *Starfarers* (Tor, \$29.95), and some familiar ideas.

Anderson has always had two levels of writing, broadly if unsatisfactorily definable as when he's doing his usual thing and when he's trying something more ambitious. The distinction is less sharp than with Roger Zelazny, for instance, whose novels can be divided fairly sharply between the Amber/Sandow books and the rest, but if you regard the Van Rijn/Flandry novels as Anderson's ground-state or stock-pot, you won't go far wrong. *Starfarers* stands on familiar ground, but by now it's a richly-stocked estate.

Among the best books of his early maturity is *The Long Way Home*, in which a the crew of the starship *Explorer* return to Earth to find their culture long dead and themselves long forgotten – not understanding how it actually worked, they had

wrongly assumed that their drive was exempt from special relativity. I read it in my early teens, and found that took a bit of swallowing, but swallow I did for the moody brilliance of the writing. A decade or so later he pulled an even more outrageous trick in *Tau Zero*, in which a starship and its occupants manage to survive both the Big Crunch and the succeeding Big Bang which gives rise to a new universe, which they are able to colonize. That I could only swallow frog-fashion, by closing my eyes, but for the sake of the writing...

The drive of the starship *Envoy* is somewhat more respectable than *Explorer's*, though she makes much

the same speed, with very similar consequences. But this time we see her on her outward journey, and her complement know what they're doing. It's what they're doing that makes one gasp and gulp.

For obvious reasons, interstellar travel has been restricted to nearby systems, but astronomers have detected the traces of what looks like a hyper-advanced civilization with very desirable technology. Only trouble is, it's 5,000 light years distant. Even so (this is the hard part), it's decided to mount an expedition to meet them and report back. The interval between launch and any return will comfortably exceed recorded history, and Anderson rather slides round the question of who regards that as a reasonable payback period, but a complement is collected and off they go. It's an unevenly mixed crew, so there's plenty of sexual tension of the sort familiar from *Tau Zero* and *The Avatar* as they head for their mysterious goal.

Their story is intercut with vignettes from the lives of more ordinary, commercial starfarers who ply between Earth and her slowly expanding sphere of colony worlds,

A Richly-Stocked Estate

Chris Gilmore

and they slot in well enough, though the starfaring Kith show a certain lack of commercial nous; they don't seem to have recognized the potential of a well-conducted auction. In this connection it's worth mentioning that two of the vignettes are in fact embedded short stories – one from 1998, one from 1954, which must make *Starfarers* the longest-gestated fix-up on record.

And what does *Envoy* find, after 6,000 light and heavy years each way? Well, there are several sorts of aliens, one lot being half-familiar from *Fire Time*, and an accident much like the one in *The Enemy Stars* (though involving a black hole rather than a pulsar) and a variety of post-industrial cultures, one recalling *There Will be Time*. I don't propose to tell you much more, as this is a most suspenseful novel. At points I found myself wondering simultaneously what *Envoy* might find and to what she might return, and I wasn't short-changed at either end.

If you don't know Anderson's *oeuvre*, this book is a handy enough starting place; if you do, you'll find it very much the mixture as before (to employ an old reviewer's cliché), but it's a varied and subtle mixture. Anderson has many virtues, but perhaps his greatest is that he's that rarest of beasts, an extreme pluralist. That shows up not only in such obvious ways as his willingness to recognize the good in people with very different views from his own, but in his ability to adopt mutually exclusive physical models as the occasion demands. Who else has written about time-travel in terms of four different rationales? This is the fruit of a big talent and liberal outlook, both of which matured early and have sustained each other over five decades. Recommended to men and women of good will everywhere.

Most writers of allegedly hard sf have a general idea that a combination of VR, AI and nanotech will affect society in novel and perhaps not entirely desirable ways, but their approach is essentially magical: they envisage a Pandora's box from which all sorts of fascinating and dangerous goodies will flow, but they could no more describe what goes on inside it than a moronic schoolboy bunking off to play arcade games – or myself using a word processor. Greg Egan, by contrast, is sufficiently familiar with some of the latest and most difficult disciplines to derive storylines from them directly. My three favourites from his last collection, *Axiomatic*, were "Learning to Be Me", "The Hundred-Light-Year Diary" and "The Cutie." They deal, respectively, with the problem of identity, the closely related problem of free will, and our deplorable capacity to turn our most imaginative inventions to misery and shame – and without recourse to any

extravagant wickedness either; commonplace venality and fatuity do very nicely. That they are authentically grounded in cybernetics, cosmology and molecular biology respectively goes a long way towards explaining Egan's uniqueness.

His latest collection, *Numinous* (Millennium, £9.99, C-format), contains more of the same, mainly from *Interzone*, though the philosophical problems have receded slightly, giving more prominence to his bleak view of human nature. The result is, in its sombre way, an exhilarating read. Of the ten stories featured, only two, "Reasons to Be Cheerful" and "The Planck Dive," contain no explicit or implicit condemnation of the human condition, and they are the least effective of the ten. The characters in "The Planck Dive" are all downloaded personalities who have departed some distance from their human roots, with consequent loss of interest. It consists mainly of highly technical speculation about what goes on in a black hole between the event horizon and the singularity, plus some ritual condemnation of a straw figure who prefers bad poetry to good science.

"Reasons to Be Cheerful" is based on a most intriguing idea, which Egan spoils by piling essentially bogus difficulties in the way of his protagonist. Suppose you were a person of very superior intelligence, and able to decide precisely what all your tastes would be. What would you choose? It is, I contend, an easy problem: you would choose tastes that were inexpensively gratified, socially acceptable and physically healthy, and they would make you happy – though I suspect the adventures of a man who hankered after all that was costly, shameful and debilitating would be more fun to read about, I'd have little sympathy if that was his condition of choice.

All eight of the others describe, with the conviction borne of precise visualization coupled to an intense intellectual bias, how discoveries ranging from the most abstract of pure mathematics ("Numinous") to the most recondite of molecular biology ("Mitochondrial Eve") can be sullied and perverted by vanity, greed and hysteria – especially when allied to a wilful refusal to acknowledge the human needs of fellow humans. This last emerges most strongly in "Silver Fire" and "Our Lady of Chernobyl," in which half-baked mysticism is used to glorify, respectively, a horrible infectious disease and a series of brutal murders.

Not a comfortable read; but having finished it I felt the spiritual regeneration which flows from contact with a superior being – a reaction which Egan himself would doubtless deplore as sentimental, self-indulgent and masochistic. Recommended, therefore, to all sentimental, self-indulgent masochists; there's a lot of us about.

Somewhere in *The Game of X* Robert Sheckley has a quip about "the Serenissima admiring herself in her mirror of dirty water." As epigraph to *Vaporetto 13* (Sceptre, £10, B-format) Robert Girardi quotes Osip Mandelstam: "Look at it, peering with its cold smile into the blue decayed glass." Venice clearly infuriates and seduces strangers in equal measure, which is very much the theme of this book.

It's a simple story, told in the first person. American yuppie Jack Squire is seconded to the Venetian branch of an Italian bank, from which he can trade currencies as well as ever while hopefully getting the feel of Italian politics. This is not a desperately good idea; to the Venetians mainland Italians are foreigners, and their politics irrelevant. Moreover, Squire finds himself chronically short of sleep, what with the glory of the evenings and the early-morning traffic of freighters and garbage scows on the canal beneath his apartment.

He therefore takes to exploring the back alleys of the city, where in due course he falls in with Caterina Vendramin, a beautiful and mysterious woman who seems to live only by night – and guess what – she *isn't* a vampire! On the other hand, she belongs to the Barnabotti, a clique of decayed aristocrats who somehow support a lifestyle of ravaged grandeur without, apparently, either earnings or investments. They make Squire welcome as a guest, though it's clear that he can never actually join their circle, even after he commences an illicit affair with Caterina. Ultimately he discovers her secret which (in true fairy-tale fashion) terminates both their affair and his employment, leaving him spiritually bruised, but perhaps a better man.

Such a simple tale needs something to sustain it, and Girardi stakes all on his command of atmosphere. I've never been to Venice, let alone lived there, so I've no idea if his descriptions of the place and the people are authentic, but if they aren't they're wonderfully inventive – the scene where a feast of entirely black foods is set in honour of the dead is a classic of its kind. Moreover, they're intrinsically gorgeous and internally consistent – I *want* to believe in this Venice. The scenes set in America are equally adept, if less gripping, and contribute to our sense of Jack's spiritual progress as Girardi varies the style to reflect his changing perspectives and values. There are no profound statements here – it's a lightweight book in every sense – but very well done.

Few writers have successfully portrayed a thoroughly loathsome individual through the first person. Burns sets a brilliant example with "Holy Willie's Prayer," Tanith Lee manages in a couple of stories, Bob Dylan in some of his early lyrics –

"Farewell, Angelina," "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright" – but to keep it up throughout a novel is rare. The pitfalls are obvious: the writer may load his character with too much wickedness to be plausible; he may seem to takes sides against his own character, so that the reader feels that he's being fed a party line; or he may, by a display of prejudices that the reader doesn't share, bring hatred and contempt on himself instead of his creation.

Jeffrey Ford manages to escape all three in *The Physiognomy* (Avon, \$3.99), which is told from the viewpoint of Cley, Physiognomist First Class, a man who brings to the metier of a Witchfinder General the methods of the worst sort of fair-ground quack. As he's also a jack-in-office who revels in violence and boorishness towards those under his thumb and addicted to "sheer beauty" (a powerful hallucinogen) he'd be well over the top in most contexts, but Ford has provided him with a suitably surreal milieu.

Cley is a citizen of the Well-Built City, which dominates the surrounding Territories, and is itself tyrannized by its megalomaniac Master. The City itself is less like any city of the past or present than a city of the future as conceived in the 1930s, but its hinterland fades into the Beyond,

a wilderness of indeterminate and possibly infinite extent. As a physiognomic "Star Five" – i.e., the peak of human perfection as specified by a array of mathematical ratios, determined in turn by a formidable kit of measuring instruments reminiscent of the "platometers" used by the Germanen Order – Cley is highly privileged, and it is as an executive plenipotentiary that he is despatched to Anamasobia, a small town near the edge of the wilderness, to investigate a crime. The crime is the theft of a single fruit, but as the fruit is believed to be of mystical significance Cley's remit extends to ordering the execution of any or all of Anamasobia's inhabitants – purely on the basis of their inherent criminality as disclosed by his measurements.

In Anamasobia Cley falls in love – according to his lights. Having measured the face of a local beauty, and satisfied himself that she is a fellow Star 5, he decides that he is entitled to her favours. He makes no attempt to pay court to her, having no concept of courtship; nonetheless, on discovering that she not only has a lover but has borne him a child, he becomes enraged at what he perceives as her infidelity and, under the influence of a powerful dose of sheer beauty, sets about reforming her character by remaking her face.

The effects are predictably catastrophic, and lead to Cley's being condemned to a period in the same sulphur mines whither he has himself consigned so many to die. There he is forced to confront the fatuous horror of his life to date, and (rather improbably) determines to do something about it should he get the chance. That chance duly arrives when he is returned to the Well-Built City, and embroiled in yet another scheme of its deranged Master.

I don't propose to disclose the ending, but the climax is thoroughly satisfying while the wind-down is somewhat sentimental for my taste; Cley's redemption seems entirely too easy and too cheap, given his past conduct. Moreover, Ford leaves a blattant, if minor, loose end.

Ford has been compared to Kafka, and the influence is obvious, but *The Physiognomy* is no pastiche – his talent is formidable and original, and if he could just apply his mind to a few such minor matters as the difference between who and whom he'd be a very good writer indeed. As it is, I look forward to his next book and hope this one finds a British publisher before long – and one who will issue it in a decent format. Avon's extreme economy with paper is unworthy of the content.

Chris Gilmore

When a usually reliable and critically lauded best-of anthology has you doubting the accuracy of its title – *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Eleventh Annual Collection* edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, St Martin's Press, \$29.95 hc, \$17.95 pb (*really? I mean, you're sure that there aren't even a handful of other tales tucked away under a bush somewhere that might, just might, be even a shade more... well, for want of a better word... enjoyable than the turgid and depressing items crowded together here?*) – then you know that you, not to mention the book you're reviewing, are in deep trouble.

Now we Neils have never been absolutely knocked out by any Datlow & Windling best-of. First off, the Datlow horror and Windling fantasy, coming from two quite distinct genres, have always seemed to us to make uneasy bedfellows, a pairing that reeks far more of publishing convenience than any deep and meaningful genre synergy. Plus, although Datlow has usually displayed a fairly sure touch in selecting strong and memorable horror tales, Windling's taste in fantasy is not ours, centring on the fey, the faery, pseudo-folk tales, magical realism and poetry we would happily do without. Still, last year's volume packed in some strong stories from both fields and set us up to expect considerably better than we got with this book.

No Fun

Neil Jones &
Neil McIntosh

Let's start with Steven Millhauser's "A Visit": Man visits old friend out in the sticks. Friend has married a frog. Man stays the night and goes home. Life goes on. Yes, we know we must have missed something, dense as we are, but we couldn't work out what it was. Then there's the normally dependable Nicholas Royle with the numbingly pointless "Kingyo No Fun" (translation? something to do with goldfish shit) following the hero through Amsterdam on a search for his missing gay lover: most definitely no fun at all. (Mind you, fair do's, Royle's second entry in this volume, "Mbo," is an efficiently executed jungle-set shocker.)

Leslie Dick's "The Skull of Charlotte Corday" is a dry, er, anatomical piece of faction, perhaps of interest to students of Freud, craniology, or French history, while the much-trumpeted but ho-hum "It Had to Be You" by Nancy Pickard tells of Marilyn Monroe's image appearing on Mount Rushmore, and the fallout therefrom.

Brendan Wyson's "The Sin Eater's Tale" is one of those marinated-in-folklore way-back-when stories and "The Sins of Elijah" by Steve Stern is an ethnic folk tale concerning a Jewish peeping-tom angel. Both would doubtless leave us better, wiser reviewers if we only gave them a chance but we were nodding off long before the end. "In the Black Mill" by Michael Chabon and "The Crawl" by Stephen Laws, nightmares-come-to-life grounded respectively in the US and England, while effectively dark in different ways are also, at least in the context of this book, more depressing than chilling.

Now for Howard Waldrop riding "El Castillo de Perseverancia." From this we expected much: what we got was a bewildering meander around some weird goings-on in and out of the wrestling ring somewhere in Mexico. There is a sense of something substantial going on somewhere, but can you be bothered to puzzle out what? Only if you possess considerable ... perseverancia.

There's a story from one the greats, Ray Bradbury, and one of us has a spot for him so soft it's melted and run away. "Driving Blind" isn't his best work – viewed objectively, in fact, it's not even his half-best. But it inhabits the familiar, vanished mid-west territory of his golden years and it's Bradbury. (Trouble is, the Bradbury-neutral Neil rates it plump, well-plucked and ready for basting



on the turkey scale.)

There are some stories that work well. Gary A. Braunbeck's "Safe" is the dark soul of America, a chillingly clinical account of mass-murder and its aftermath: churning, but with a layer of humanity too. And Jeffrey Schaffer's "Winner Takes All" is a slender slice of eccentricity, short and fun (the opposite of our verdict on the book overall). Christopher Fowler's "Spanky's Back in Town" is a take on the old demons-in-human-form riff, following said demon's ungodly quest for a long-lost Fabergé artefact; it earns its keep with its freshness and shrewd balance of horror and humour.

P. D. Cacek's "Dust Motes" is a pleasant surprise, and a gentle, upbeat affirmation of a ghost story. Vikram Chandra brings off an atmospheric India-set ghost story in "Dharma," and Norman Partridge's "Bucket of Blood" serves up a tasty slice of American myth. Ellen Kusher and Delia Sherman's "The Fall of Kings" and Peter S. Beagle's "The Last Song of Sirit Byar" are both stylish and readable fantasies. There's also one overlap with the Dozois sf best-of, "Gulliver at Home" by John

Kessel, which skilfully and engagingly deals with the flip-side of Gulliver's travels. Classy, whatever brand it's marketed under, but for us it's fantasy, not sf, and better belongs here.

Not so "Remnants" by Paul J. McAuley and Kim Newman. Easily the best story in the book, our world but not quite, sprinkled with media references, it's a low-key meeting-with-alien tale and clearly sf so what's it doing here? (Not that we're complaining exactly.)

So there are some good stories here, scattered through the volume, and listing them like this makes us wonder why we couldn't – and still can't – feel more positive about the book as a whole. (And also ask ourselves if some of these stories might rate even higher on our admittedly subjective personal scales if they weren't mired amid their remorselessly dismal companions?) The answer is that there just isn't enough really good stuff here to add up to an enjoyable reading experience... Although, perhaps – just perhaps – if you teased out the straight horror stories here you might get, if not by any means a best-of from a good year, at least a coherent, even halfway consistent, read.

Perhaps it's us. Perhaps we are just not capable of appreciating the literary masterpieces placed before us. Whatever, both of us found ourselves not so much reading this book as praying it would end. Now, surely this is not what the reading experience is supposed to be?

Or perhaps it is. Reach your own verdict without first reaching into your pocket to buy this book. "The Psychomantium" by Molly Brown appeared here in *Interzone* 116; David Pringle liked it enough to buy it; Datlow and Windling rated it up there with the best of the year. But, although we've read some terrific Molly Brown stories and we really wanted to like this one, we judged it inhabited that chilly borderland between well-OK-I-suppose and dreary.

Which, come to think of it, is better than we can say for this collection as a whole. Yes, there are always the detailed (and admittedly) worthwhile overviews of the year in fantasy and horror, including film, TV and comics. But as far as the fiction is concerned – if these stories are truly the very best of fantasy and horror for 1997, then include us out.

Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh

For many readers of the original Foundation Trilogy, the trial of Hari Seldon is one of the most memorable scenes. Added by author Isaac Asimov for the book publication of the first stories, which were originally featured in *Astounding* magazine from 1942 to 1944, Seldon's trial is a succinct summing up of the 1,000-Year Plan, and incidentally introduces a fascinating character of whom we see no more in Asimov's works: Linge Chen, the Great Baron of the Galaxy. After nearly a 50-year wait, Greg Bear gives us more of this worthy antagonist for Hari Seldon in *Foundation and Chaos* (Orbit £16.99), the middle book of the Second Foundation Trilogy.

The idea for this trilogy came from Janet Asimov, Asimov's widow, and Ralph Vicinanza, Asimov's estate representative. Greg Benford wrote the first in this series, *Foundation's Fear* (1997), and David Brin is scheduled to write the third and final book. All three hard-sf writers, the three 'B's, have consulted together to plan a continuous saga which develops Asimov's original creation; a saga that was voted a Hugo in 1966 as the "Best All-Time Series."

Foundation and Chaos focuses on the period when Hari Seldon is coming to the end of his role in the Foundation Project. As in Benford's novel, Seldon seems more a puppet than the puppet-master as several factions vie for control of the Galaxy's destiny. Groups of robots are forced into opposition by their differing interpretations of the Laws of Robotics: a religious schism worthy of Hal's dys-

Underpinning the Foundations

Nigel Brown

function in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The artificial entities introduced by Benford in the last novel also battle for influence, and added to this is the appearance of powerful mentalics on Trantor which threaten the basis of psychohistory itself. The machinations of the Galactic Emperor and his henchman seem trivial in comparison, but Bear manages to interweave the various strands of plot so that the reader is never confused.

Part of his method is to structure the novel into 92 chapters, on average only 3½ pages long. These tightly written scenes mimic Asimov's own clear style well; Bear does a better job at this than Benford. Several new characters that Bear introduces are quite moving – particularly an ancient robot called Plussix. Its metallic body, with the "patina of well-tended antique silver," gives this series a welcome sense of timespan within Asimov's body of work. Plussix's memories stretch back to the days of the early Asimov Robot stories. Older readers will identify with Plussix's nostalgia for those simpler times.

Besides Hari Seldon's trial, this

novel tackles a problem Asimov created himself when he continued the Foundation saga beyond the original Trilogy. Seldon's reputation as an infallible prophet, although damaged by the emergence of the Mule mutation, was an attractive feature of the Foundation series. When Asimov revealed the robots as the power behind the scenes, this sapped Seldon of much of his appeal. Even worse, Seldon was ultimately proved a total failure when the Foundation Project ended with its replacement by the Galaxia Unification at the end of Asimov's *Foundation and Earth* (1986). Bear rescues Seldon's reputation by demonstrating, with a credible plot, how the later Asimov books are a more satisfying conclusion than on first appreciation. If the reader is prepared to go along with this revisionist exercise, it does not irritate.

Also, the implications of Seldon's use of psychohistory are explored further. The robots' efforts to protect humanity, using psychohistory, lead to a general reduction of risk, then to dull conformity for the human race. Humans are protected from chaos. This is the central issue of the book, hence the title. The warning in the narrative is that risk, of course, is essential for the long-term survival of the species. The robots are killing us with kindness.

This new novel is an essential, enjoyable read for fans of Asimov's Foundation saga. We now await David Brin's book eagerly, especially to see how he runs with the ball. By this second book, Greg Bear seems to have already hit the target.

Nigel Brown

Short stories have always been one of the quickest ways for a new author to get his or her work into print. From small-press magazines to hardback anthologies, the market is extensive and continues to draw the attentions of many of the world's leading novelists. Of these some are primarily known for short fiction, or show exceptional talent in that form.

In the field of horror writers like Ramsey Campbell, Terry Lamsley and Michael Marshall Smith are still most associated with short fiction, despite their subsequent success as genre novelists. Interestingly enough, the horror story, as a expressive form of literature, seems to be changing. Take the *Pan Books of Horror*, a distant forerunner to today's *Dark Terrors* anthologies. Comparing these two series is one very effective way of discovering just how much the horror genre has developed in the last 20 or so years. It's comforting to discover that, generation after generation, there are still some forms of literature we can actually improve upon. *Dark Terrors*, the premier UK anthology of horror fiction, is about to enter its fourth year of publication with a fresh crop of horrors to chill your veins. Aided by a dark congregation of big name writers and talented newcomers, Messrs Jones and Sutton have ensured that *Dark Terrors 4* (Gollancz, £16.99) is definitely an event.

The sparklers in this year's display include Neil Gaiman's "The Wedding Present" in which newly-weds Belinda and Gordon Johnson find a strange envelope left behind as a gift from an unknown guest at their ceremony. It's a deeply unsettling tale, lingering in the memory long after many of its counterparts have been forgotten. David J. Schow tells you exactly what are "The True Fact of the Case" by turning his fantastically original narrative loose on the Ripper legend, while series veteran Michael Marshall Smith spins a darkly amusing yarn best described as a cross between *Interview with the Vampire* and *Groundhog Day*.

In stark contrast to last year's sweating palms and nervous page-turning, I actually found myself laughing at some of the ingredients in the new brew. Thankfully (unlike many other dark-hued publications) much of the humour here is intentional. Richard Christian Matheson's "The Great Fall" is an obvious example, stylishly written and devilishly clever, while Christopher Fowler reviles the mind with his story of a serial killer who, after meeting a mysterious stranger, discovers that he lives a comparatively "Normal Life." The rest of the stories in *Dark Terrors 4* are capable enough, although regulars Ramsey Campbell and Terry Lamsley fail to maintain standards set in previous editions.

Two Good Books and a Cost-Effective Mind-Enema

David L. Stone

Campbell's tale of supernaturally-tormented choirboy Fergal is unsettling and well-written, but lacks the visual brilliance of "Horror Under Warrendown" in *DT3* (to my mind the best short story Ramsey has ever written).

In conclusion, *Dark Terrors* remains the one anthology in the field that fans simply cannot do without. The only clunker in the mix is Donald R. Burleson's "Tumbleweeds," a tale so predictable I fancy big-budget Hollywood adaptations cannot be far away...

Starlight 2 (Tor, \$13.95) is an anthology edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden, who won a 1997 World Fantasy Award for *Starlight 1*. In his introductory notes, Hayden comments on the difference between sf and fantasy. It's an old argument, and one that has been mulled over by generations of critics. Hayden doesn't add anything particularly new aside from mentioning that simple "telepathy" doesn't make a fantasy novel sf. It's a thought-provoking statement and one

which I eventually concluded to be completely and utterly incorrect.

On to the anthology itself. Those readers with an eye for distasteful fruit might care to note that the windfall apple in this year's collection is "Snow" by Geoffrey A. Landis, undoubtedly the author's worst story to date. It's cold and depressing, which is intentional. It's also dull and abruptly-concluded, which (I sincerely hope) isn't. The protagonist doesn't have enough time to develop and the plot has no pretensions to depth or originality, so nothing rings true.

Stories worthy of individual mentions include Robert Charles Wilson's "Divided By Infinity," in which a retired accountant with suicidal tendencies attempts to cope with life following the demise of his wife. The resulting tale is a moving, innovative sf yarn, and one that is bound inspire *X-Files*' screenwriters to come up with another 20 or so episodes. Another story of note is Ellen Kushner's "The Death of the Duke" in which the title character, an elderly noble with a young wife, returns home to die. Lastly, Nebula Award-winner Martha Soukup adds to her already impressive reputation with the tale of Tom Aaron, an unhappily married man who is encouraged by his wife (an extremely irritating character) to look for sexual fulfilment elsewhere. Unfortunately, a visit to "The House of Expectations" doesn't quite go to plan. A quality anthology, and a fair bet for a second World Fantasy Award next time around.

Take the work of H. P. Lovecraft, mix in a feature-length Manga animation and add a little post-human pornography. *Voila!* You have acquired a vivid insight into the work of David Conway... and, yes, it's pretty appalling stuff.

Unfortunately Grant Morrison, in his introduction to Conway's collection *Metal Sushi* (Oneiros Books, £7.95), chooses to explain this at some length before bailing out and leaving you alone with the horrors. Describing the individual stories is a task best avoided. In other words, a story that begins with the phrase "Razor hail maelstrom of endless orgasm" and continues in similar fashion is a little difficult to reason out.

Nevertheless I fought on through 200 pages of mind-melting chaos, face crumpled up like a brown paper bag. This is the type of book a librarian would conceal among the Maeve Binchy and Catherine Cookson assortment, fearful that it might be stumbled upon by one of *those* people. If mind-molestation appeals to you call Oneiros immediately, but for goodness sake don't leave this on Granny's chair.

David L. Stone



BOOKS RECEIVED



SEPTEMBER 1998

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Patricia. **Eating Memories.** Introduction by Charles C. Ryan. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00556-X, x+367pp, A-format paperback, \$6.50. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1997; 28 stories from Patricia Anthony's first decade as a published writer; many of them appeared originally in Charlie Ryan's struggling little magazine *Aboriginal SF*: this particular P. Anthony [as opposed to the other P. Anthony] would seem to be his great editorial discovery.) 1st September 1998.

Arden, Tom. **The Harlequin's Dance: First Book of The Orokon.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60192-2, 572pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1997; reviewed [very positively] by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 125; "Tom Arden" is the pseudonym of an Australian-born academic, lately of Queen's University, Belfast, and now living in Hove, Sussex.) 22nd October 1998.

Ash, Sarah. **The Lost Child.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-683-7, 344pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1998; see the interview with the author which appeared in *Interzone* 129; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *IZ* 132.) 21st September 1998.

Aylett, Steve. **Slaughtermatic.** Phoenix House, ISBN 1-861591-22-5, 181pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Sf/crime novel, first published in the USA, 1998; proof copy received; the freaky, hard-to-classify Aylett [born 1967] is British, but this one first appeared from Four Walls Eight Windows in America; Iain Sinclair, Paul Di Filippo and others commend it on the back cover, and Phoenix House [an imprint of Orion] seem to be giving it some mainstream push, no doubt hoping to achieve a Jeff Noon-like trendiness for the author, whose third book this is.) 26th October 1998.

Barnes, John. **Apostrophes and Apocalypses.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86147-8, 351pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; Barnes's first gathering of shorter work, it contains 20-odd pieces, fiction and non-fiction, some of them previously unpublished.) December 1998.

Barton, William, and Michael Capobianco. **White Light.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79515-9, 343pp, trade paperback, \$13. (Sf novel, first edition; Barton and Capobianco's fourth collaborative novel, it seems to have something to do with that oft-derided but still-seductive concept, Frank J. Tipler's Omega Point at the end of the universe; the title *White Light* has already been used for a quite well-known novel by Rudy Rucker [1980]; we mistook this volume for a proof copy at first, but no, it seems to be the final thing; someone had the bright idea of giving it a white front cover – unfortunately, it doesn't work.) October 1998.

Brenchley, Chaz. **Tower of the King's Daughter: The First Book of Outremer.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-692-0, 600pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a full-fledged big commercial fantasy by an author hitherto best known for horror and crime fiction.) 1st October 1998.

Byatt, A. S. **Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice.** Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-6096-9, 232pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Munch, £12. (Literary short-story collection, first edition; proof copy received; it's by a noted mainstream novelist, but we've been given the tip-off that much of it is fantasy [as was her previous collection, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 92]; her last novel, *Babel Tower*, was a "mundane utopia" – in the tradition of Sarah Scott's *Millennium Hall* [1762]. Mary McCarthy's *A Source of Embarrassment* [1950] and Fay Weldon's *Darcy's Utopia* [1990] – and hence of some slight kinship to sf; latterly, the Booker Prize-winning Antonia Byatt has been appearing on panels, and in print, as a born-again Terry Pratchett fan – not that that necessarily gives any indication of what these stories are like.) 26th November 1998.

Callander, Don. **Dragon Tempest.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00555-1, 243pp, A-format paperback, cover by Eric J. W. Lee, \$5.99. (Light fantasy novel, first edition; about a "librarian from Iowa named Tom... add one magical dragon, one beautiful princess," it appears to be a follow-up to an earlier novel called *Dragan Campanian*.) 1st September 1998.

Campbell, Ramsey. **Ghosts and Grisly Things.** Pumpkin Books [PO Box 297, Nottingham NG2 4GW], ISBN 1-901914-08-9, xvi+300pp, trade paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £6.99. (Horror collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; 20 stories including a previously-unpublished novelette; most are reprinted from original anthologies of the last decade or so.) 12th September 1998.

De Lint, Charles. **Moonlight and Vines: A Newford Collection.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86518-X, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; 21 stories, mostly from original anthologies of the last few years; a couple are original to the book.) January 1999.

Donaldson, Stephen. **Reave the Just and Other Tales.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224691-0, 357pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Goodfellow and Kevin Jenkins, £17.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition [?]; Donaldson's second gathering of shorter work, it contains eight stories, mostly reprinted from original anthologies.) 19th October 1998.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Good New Stuff.** "Adventure SF in the Grand Tradition." St Mar-

tin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-19890-6, xv+457pp, trade paperback, \$17.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; this follow-up to *The Good Old Stuff* [1998], contains reprint stories, chronologically arranged from 1977 to 1998, by Stephen Baxter, Tony Daniel, Peter F. Hamilton, Janet Kagan, Paul J. McAuley, Maureen F. McHugh, George R. R. Martin, G. David Nordley, Robert Reed, R. Garcia y Robertson, Mary Rosenblum, Bruce Sterling, Michael Swanwick, George Turner, John Varley, Vernor Vinge and Walter Jon Williams, all chosen to prove that yes, they do still write them like that – exciting sf adventure stories, that is; the Hamilton and McAuley pieces, "Escape Route" and "All Tomorrow's Parties," are reprinted from *Interzone*; recommended.) January 1999.

Durie, Bruce. **The High History of the Holy Quail.** Citron Press [Suite 1S5, Business Design Centre, S2 Upper Street, London N1 0QH], ISBN 0-7544-0003-4, 231pp, trade paperback, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; this work by a Scottish writer, presumably his debut novel, is one of the products of a self-publishing collective, "New Authors Co-Operative"; it's quite nicely produced – except that the print is too small.) 24th September 1998.

Eggleton, Bob. **The Book of Sea Monsters.** Text by Nigel Suckling. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-463-S, 112pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Eggleton, £14.99. (Fantasy art portfolio; first edition; these skilful paintings, and Suckling's quite substantial text, deal with all manner of traditional water-dwelling monsters, from the mythical Midgard Serpent and the legendary Kraken to supposed prehistoric survivals in Loch Ness and elsewhere; another attractive package from Paper Tiger: it would make a nice gift-book.) 17th September 1998.

Etchison, Dennis. **Double Edge.** Pumpkin Books [PO Box 297, Nottingham NG2 4GW], ISBN 1-901914-11-9, 178pp, trade paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1997; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; this is the "Lizzie Borden" story which Etchison mentioned in his interview here in *Interzone* a few months ago.) 12th September 1998.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Parallelities.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42461-1, 309pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a light adventure romp about a tabloid reporter who becomes a "human gate" to parallel worlds.) 1st September 1998.

Froud, Brian. **Good Faeries/Bad Faeries.** Edited by Terri Windling. Pavilion, ISBN 1-86205-270-0, unpaginated [about 200pp], hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy art portfolio, first published in the USA, 1998; this is a "sequel" to Froud's earlier, famous book *Faeries* [with Alan Lee, 1978]; it's gorgeously produced, in a *das à das* format ["good" one side, "bad" the other], with some 200 colour reproductions and a substantial text; recommended as a gift book for those who like fairy art.) 22nd October 1998.

Gaiman, Neil. **Stardust.** Avon/Spike, ISBN 0-380-97728-1, 238pp, hardcover, \$22. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; quite short [it's set in fairly large type with wide margins], it appears to be a latter-day tale of Faerie, in the vein of those minor classics of the 1920s, Hope Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist* and Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*; it's dedicated "For Gene and Rosemary Wolfe," and carries a poem by John Donne as an epigraph.) 6th January 1999.

Greenberg, Martin H., ed. **Lord of the Fantastic: Stories in Honor of Roger Zelazny.** Introduction by Fred Saberhagen. Avon/Eos,

ISBN 0-380-78737-7, vi+373pp, trade paperback, \$14. (*Sf/fantasy festschrift* anthology, first edition; it contains mainly new stories, some of them set in the late Roger Zelazny's imaginary worlds, by Gregory Benford, Steven Brust, Neil Gaiman [who seems to have become the standard honorary Brit on the US *festschrift* scene], Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Jane Lindskold, Andre Norton, Jennifer Roberson, Robert Sheckley, Robert Silverberg, William Browning Spencer, John Varley, Walter Jon Williams, Jack Williamson and others.) *September 1998.*

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Neutronium Alchemist: Book Two of the Night's Dawn Trilogy.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-35143-5, 1273pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £7.99. (*Sf* novel, first published in 1997; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 127; yes, that page count is correct – 1,273 pages; the book is so fat they've even managed to fit a smaller reproduction of Jim Burns's cover painting on the spine!) *9th October 1998.*

Hendrix, Howard V. **Standing Wave.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00553-S, 386pp, A-format paperback, cover by Phil Heffernan, \$6.50. (*Sf* novel, first edition; Hendrix's second novel, it's set in the same universe as his first, *Lightpoths* [1997]; ignore the fact that it's a "mere" paperback original: it looks as though it may be the sort of idea-rich sf – the real stuff – which should appeal to admirers of Ian Watson's or Greg Egan's novels; the author [born 1959] has degrees in both biology and English, and has previously written a non-fiction book called *The Ecstasy of Cotostrophe* [1990] – described as "a study of apocalyptic elements in English literature from Langland to Milton.") *1st September 1998.*

Holt, Tom. **Holt! Who Goes There?** Edited by David J. Howe. British Fantasy Society [2 Harwood St., Stockport SK4 1JJ], ISBN 0-952-4153-3X, 45pp, paperbound, cover by Anne Russell, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy collection, first edition; this stapled booklet lacks a blurb, but according to the accompanying publicity sheet, "taken from his regular column in the British Fantasy Society's newsletter, and including two rare short stories ... [this is] the perfect antidote for the blues.") *September 1998.*

Jones, J. V. **The Barbed Coil.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-568-1, 667pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; J. V. Jones [Julie Victoria Jones, not to be confused with Jenny Jones] is a relatively new British-born author, now living in California; this is her fourth novel and appears to be a singleton, i.e. it is unrelated to her "Book of Words" trilogy; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 132.) *1st October 1998.*

Kay, Guy Gavriel. **Sailing to Sarantium.** "Book One of The Sarantine Mosaic." Earthlight, ISBN 0-684-85169-5, 438pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Canada [?], 1998; it's "a fantasy upon themes of Byzantium.") *19th October 1998.*

Kosko, Bart. **Nanotime.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-79147-1, 336pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (*Sf* novel, first published in the USA, 1997; a debut novel by a Californian academic best known for his non-fiction book *Fuzzy Thinking*; it's set in the year 2030, but the philosopher John Stuart Mill appears as a "software ghost" character; there's an eight-page selected bibliography at the back of the book, and a map of the Middle East at the front; note that this is not an Avon/Eos, or generic sf, title: in other words, they're slanting it to a mainstream thriller audience; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 128.) *September 1998.*

Kress, Nancy. **Stinger.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86536-8, 303pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (*Sf* "biomedical thriller," first edition; proof copy received.) *October 1998.*

Lawson, Philip. **Would it Kill You to Smile?** Longstreet Press [2140 Newmarket Parkway, Suite 122, Marietta, GA 30067, USA], ISBN 1-56352-511-9, 207pp, hardcover, cover by David Turner, \$22. (Humorous mystery novel, first edition; "the author lives in Pine Mountain, Georgia, and Providence, Rhode Island," according to the note on the back-flap – which, to those in the know, is a clue to the fact that this is a collaborative novel by two of *Interzone*'s well-known American contributors, Michael Bishop and Paul Di Filippo; it looks like fun.) *No date shown: sent to us by Poul Di Filippo in September 1998.*

Lewis, Mick. **The Bloody Man.** Citron Press [Suite 1SS, Business Design Centre, S2 Upper Street, London N1 0QH], ISBN 0-7544-0009-3, 223pp, trade paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first edition; this, which is probably a debut novel, is another of the products of a self-publishing collective, "New Authors Co-Operative"; again, as with Bruce Durie's book [see above], it's quite nicely designed – but the print is still too small.) *24th September 1998.*

McCaffrey, Anne. **Black Horses for the King.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42257-0, xv+206pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Shannon, \$6.95. (Juvenile Arthurian historical novel, first published in 1996; it's an expansion of the short story "Black Horses for a King" which originally appeared in Jane Yolen's *Comelet* anthology [1995]; basically a tale about the shoeing of Lord Artos's horses, it seems to have no overt fantasy content.) *1st September 1998.*

McDevitt, Jack. **Moonfall.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224690-2, 464pp, hardcover, cover by John Ennis, £16.99. (*Sf* novel, first published in the USA, 1998; about a comet strike which causes fragments of the Moon to fall on the Earth; not to be confused with Stephen Baxter's *Moonseed* [out from the same publisher in the same season]; pitched at the mainstream thriller readership, it's billed as "the ultimate disaster novel," with nary a mention of science fiction even though its author has written several straight-down-the-line sf novels before now.) *19th October 1998.*

McKillop, Patricia A. **Song for the Basilisk.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00447-4, 314pp, hardcover, cover by Kinuko Y. Craft, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a nicely-produced volume in the small hardcover format which is becoming fashionable with US publishers such as Ace and Avon – a good thing, we think: we've lived too long in an age of big ugly books.) *1st September 1998.*

May, Julian. **Sky Trillium.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38001-0, 371pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; fifth in the "Trillium" series, initiated by Julian May but other parts of which have been written by Marion Zimmer Bradley and Andre Norton.) *1st September 1998.*

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Colors of Chaos.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86767-0, 636pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the ninth "Recluce" novel; this latest "monthly Modesitt" [only a slight exaggeration] is yet another vast tome; is there any more prolific writer in the *sf*/fantasy fields today? – we doubt it.) *January 1999.*

Moorcock, Michael. **Count Brass.** "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 14." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-720-5, 401pp, A-format paperback, cover by Yoshitaka Amano, £6.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in this form in 1993; the trilogy of constituent novels, *Count Brass*, *The Chomption of Gorothon* and *The Quest for Tonelom*, first appeared as paperback originals

in 1973 and 1975; there is a four-page preface by the author, and a map by James Cawthorn; this volume is new to us: we were not sent a review copy of the hardcover back in 1993; nor, more recently, do we seem to have been sent volumes 12 and 13 – entitled *Storm-bringer* and *Eorl Aubec* – of this paperback reissue of the series.) *21st September 1998.*

Noon, Jeff. **Nymphomation.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14479-7, 363pp, B-format paperback, cover by Daniel Mackie, £6.99. (*Sf*/fantasy novel, first published in 1997; it's described as "a skewed prequel to *Vurt*"; we missed this one in hardcover [probably because the publishers were promoting it as non-generic], and in the meantime Jeff Noon's reputation has continued to soar – this paperback comes decorated with enthusiastic quotes from magazines like *The Face* and *Q*, not to mention others so achingly trendy we haven't even heard of them [*Flux? The Power? Attitude?*].) *8th October 1998.*

Noon, Jeff. **Pixel Juice: Stories from the Avant Pulp.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40859-S, 306pp, hardcover, cover by Daniel Mackie, £15.99. (*Sf*/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains 50 short pieces, only half a dozen of which have been published before [in papers such as *The Big Issue* and *The Guardian*]; the publishers seem at a loss for an adequate descriptive: "Call it Slipstream, call it Avant Pulp, call it Transfiction, Kaleidopunk, Techno-Whimsy or Genre Melt..." [actually, Noon probably wrote that blurb himself]; whatever, it's brilliant, poetic, sparky stuff by Britain's very own, Northern-bred equivalent of the late William S. Burroughs: recommended.) *8th October 1998.*

Norton, Andre. **Scent of Magic.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97687-0, 361pp, hardcover, cover by Kinuko Craft, \$23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this is the first new solo novel that we've seen from Norton in quite some time: although she is not quite as old as Jack Williamson, she has been hard at it since the 1930s.) *October 1998.*

Pellegrino, Charles. **Dust.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-S0706-0, 543pp, A-format paperback, no price shown. (*Sf* novel, first published in the USA, 1998; proof copy received; a near-future disaster story by an American author who is best known for his non-fiction science books and who looks as though he is trying to outdo Michael Crichton here; there is a lengthy author's afterword and bibliography; Arthur C. Clarke commends it as "a novel even scarier than *Jaws*.") *February 1999.*

Phillips, Graham. **Act of God: Tutankhamun, Moses & the Myth of Atlantis.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-35206-7, 358pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Pseudo-science and pseudo-history text, first published in 1998; we keep getting sent books like this – you know the genre: they're devoted to "unsolved mysteries," and they come plastered with glowing quotes from the *Birmingham Sunday Mercury* and the *Teeside Evening Gazette* – and usually we toss them aside; but perhaps we shouldn't be so contemptuous, since clearly there is an enduring public demand for them; in fact, it was an early American science-fiction writer who began the vogue for this sort of thing well over a hundred years ago – Ignatius Donnelly, author of *Coesor's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* [1890], who also wrote the bestselling "non-fiction" works *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* [1882], *Rognorok: The Age of Fire and Grovel* [1883] and *The Great Cryptogram* [1888]; the last-named volume asserted that Bacon wrote Shakespeare, a daft literary obsession which, oddly perhaps, seems to go with Pyramidology, Atlantism and Catastrophism: sure enough, we note that our present author, Graham Phillips, lists among his earlier books one entitled *The Shakespeare Conspiracy*.) *9th October 1998.*

Pringle, David, ed. **The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Fantasy: The Definitive Illustrated Guide.** Foreword by Terry Pratchett. Carlton Books, ISBN 1-85868-621-0, 256pp, hardcover, cover by Gerry Grace, £19.99. (Large-format copiously-illustrated guide to the fantasy genre, first edition; it contains: sections on the history and types of fantasy; extensive chapters on cinematic and television fantasy; an A-Z of authors; another section, also alphabetical, on fictional characters and entities; plus chapters on games, fantasy worlds, and magazines, followed by a glossary and index; contributors of substantial text include Brian Stableford and David Langford.) 23rd October 1998.

Pritchard, John. **Dark Ages.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649637-7, xi+756pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first edition; this is the author's fourth novel, and a big 'un – set mainly in present-day Oxford but invoking horrors from the past.) 5th October 1998.

Rice, Anne. **Violin.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-925515-4, 367pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this was Rice's last-year's novel, which we did not see in hardcover [apparently there was a Chatto & Windus edition in the UK]; according to one of the review quotes, it's about a haunted violin – shades of J. Meade Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius*?) 1st October 1998.

Richards, E. G. **Mapping Time: The Calendar and Its History.** Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-850413-6, xxi+438pp, hardcover, cover by the Limbourg Brothers, £20. (Popular science text, first edition; a big definitive guide to all matters calendrical, it ought to be useful to sf and fantasy writers as well as of intrinsic interest to sf readers; did you know that our Christian Era dating system wasn't invented until AD 532 [by a Moldavian abbot known as Dionysius Exiguus] and didn't come into general use until the 11th century?; which just goes to show that our coming turn-of-the-millennium is about as relevant, from a universal point of view, as the Romans' celebration in AD 247 of the thousandth anniversary of the foundation of their city [traditionally supposed to be 753 BC] and hence of their calendrical millennium.) September 1998.

Robinson, Frank M. **Waiting...** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86652-6, 303pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new book by the veteran author of *The Power*, *The Towering Inferno* and *The Dark Beyond the Stars*, it comes with advance commendations from William Gibson, David Morrell, Peter Straub and Wilson Tucker, among others.) April 1999.

Silverberg, Robert, ed. **Legends: Short Novels by the Masters of Modern Fantasy.** Illustrated by Michael Whelan [misspelled "Whalen"]. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86787-S, 715pp, hardcover, endpapers by Darrell K. Sweet, \$27.95. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; all-original stories, each set in its creator's best-known world, by the most commercially-successful fantasy authors of recent years [sans David Eddings]: Orson Scott Card, Raymond E. Feist, Terry Goodkind, Robert Jordan, Stephen King, Ursula Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey, George R. R. Martin, Terry Pratchett and Tad Williams – plus a story by Silverberg himself, set in his "Majipoor" world; this edition is more generously laid-out and illustrated than the UK edition [from HarperCollins/Voyager] which we listed here last month; as is usually the case in American publishing, megastar Terry Pratchett's presence is curiously downplayed: his name is not listed on the front cover – apparently Jordan, Goodkind and Feist are all bigger draws in the States – and the unmistakable Josh Kirby artwork



which graces the British edition is missing here.) 10th September 1998.

Stableford, Brian. **Yesterday's Bestsellers: A Journey Through Literary History.** "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 34." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-8095-1906-2, 160pp, trade paperback, no price shown. (Collection of essays on popular authors, most of whom wrote some fantasy or horror; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains 15 reprinted pieces, plus an index; writers covered include F. Anstey, Lewis Carroll, Marie Corelli, Robert Graves, Rider Haggard, Robert Hichens, James Hilton, W. H. Hudson, Bulwer Lytton and P. C. Wren; all of these essays first appeared either in *Interzone* or in its sister magazine *Millian* [1990-93]; in his three-page introduction, Stableford credits *Millian* but not *Interzone*; recommended.) *Nat* actually received for review: sent to us by the author, September 1998.

Stasheff, Christopher. **The Warlock in Spite of Himself.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00560-8, x+374pp, trade paperback, cover by Stephen Hickman, \$13. (Science-fantasy novel, first published in 1969; this reprint of Stasheff's debut novel contains a new six-page intro by the author, headed "Introduction to the Ace Classic Edition.") September 1998.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **Manly Wade Wellman: The Gentleman from Chapel Hill—A Working Bibliography.** 3rd edition. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 17." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-S1-3, ix+76pp, paperbound, £4. (Horror/fantasy author bibliography; the first edition appeared in 1986; this updated reissue is in saddle-stitched AS format; a thorough piece of work on one of the older American authors [1903-1986].) *Late entry:* August publication, received in September 1998.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Chris Drumm. **John T. Sladek: Steam-Driven Satirist – A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 49." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-S0-S, ix+54pp, paperbound, £3. (Sf author bibliography; first edition; in saddle-stitched A5 format; another thorough piece of work, on an author [born 1937, but publishing little recently] who is

particularly deserving of reappraisal; book-dealer Chris Drumm, it would seem, is Phil Stephensen-Payne's new American bibliographical partner, taking the place of the late Gordon Benson as co-editor and co-publisher.) *Late entry:* August publication, received in September 1998.

Stewart, Sean. **The Night Watch.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00554-3, 338pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tara McGovern-Benson, \$6.50. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; it's set in the same future world, where magic works, as the author's earlier novel *Resurrection Man* [1995 – reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 100].) 1st September 1998.

Swanwick, Michael. **Jack Faust.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-79070-X, 337pp, trade paperback, cover by Greg Spalenka, \$12. (Sf/historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; one of the best books of last year; reviewed, glowingly, by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 125.) September 1998.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Silmarillion.** "The myths and legends of Middle-Earth." Edited by Christopher Tolkien. Illustrated by Ted Nasmith. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10366-0, 365pp, hardcover, cover by Nasmith, £19.99. (Fantasy "novel," first published in 1977; this is the first illustrated edition, containing 20 colour plates by the talented Canadian artist Nasmith; there is also a simultaneous "special limited deluxe edition" priced at £100 [not seen].) 21st September 1998.

Turtledove, Harry. **Departures.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38011-8, ix+326pp, A-format paperback, cover by Eric Peterson, \$6.99. (Alternate-history sf collection, first published in the USA, 1993; it contains 20 stories, reprinted in the main from *Amazing*, *Analog*, *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, and here arranged in chronological order of internal events; this is the seventh printing; Del Rey seem to be doing well with Turtledove's books.) 1st October 1998.

Wallace, Sean, and Philip Harbottle. **The Tall Adventurer: The Works of E. C. Tubb.** "An annotated guide to every book & short story." Becon Publications [75 Rosslyn Ave., Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG], ISBN 1-870824-32-6, 200pp, small-press paperback, cover by Ron Turner, £12. (Descriptive bibliography, with critical annotations, of the fiction, non-fiction, comics strips, etc. by one of Britain's most prolific sf writers; first edition; this is a considerable labour of love, nicely produced [physically, it resembles a fat issue of *Foundation: The International Review of SF*, and probably shares a printer with that journal]; there are black-and-white illustrations taken from books and magazines; the junior co-author, Sean Wallace, was born in 1976 – which makes him very young to be a fan of an author whose career flourished mainly in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s [although Tubb, born 1919, is still alive and writing today; his recent stories appear in *Fantasy Annual*, Philip Harbottle's new "yearly magazine," which we have not seen]; recommended to all those with an interest in Tubb and in the British paperback-original sf of the postwar period.) *Late entry:* 27th August publication, received in September 1998.

Ward, C. E. **Vengeful Ghosts.** Illustrated by Paul Lowe. Sarob Press [Brynderwen, 41 Forest View, Mountain Ash, Mid-Glamorgan CF45 3DU], ISBN 1-902309-01-4, xii+104pp, hardcover, £18. (Horror collection, first edition; eight stories, mainly set in Staffordshire, by a British author, five of them reprinted from the quality small-press magazine *Ghosts & Scholars*; it's probably a debut book, but the author, Clive Edward Ward, is unlikely to be young since it is dedicated to his father, whose

dates are given as 1913-1985; a nicely-produced edition, limited to 250 numbered copies, this is one for connoisseurs of the trad English ghostly tale. School of M. R. James.) *Late entry: August publication, received in September 1998.*

Webb, Wendy, and Charles Grant, eds. **Gothic Ghosts.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86684-4, 256pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Horror anthology, first published in 1997; it contains all-new tales, in a traditional ghost-story vein, by Matthew J. Costello, Esther M. Friesner, Rick Hautala, Nancy Holder, Rick Kennet, Stuart Palmer, Kathryn Ptacek, Carrie Richerson, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Brian Stableford, Brad Strickland, Lucy Taylor, Robert

Bear, Greg. **Dinosaur Summer.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648367-4, 367pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; sequel by another hand to Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* [1912], set decades later in a divergent timeline where the events of Doyle's adventure story are supposed to be true; it's also a Hollywood novel, in that film-makers Merian C. Cooper & Ernest Schoedsack [of King Kong fame], Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen all appear as characters; essentially a kids' book, although not presented by HarperCollins/Voyager as such, it looks like good fun for all ages.) *19th October 1998.*

David, Peter. **Thirdspace.** "Babylon S." Box-tree, ISBN 0-7522-2489-1, 256pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1998; based on a script by J. Michael Straczynski for a feature-length episode.) *18th September 1998.*

Howe, David J., and Stephen James Walker. **Doctor Who: The Handbook: The Seventh Doctor.** Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20527-8, x+310pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £6.99. (Companion to the *Doctor Who* BBC television series which starred Sylvester McCoy [1987-1989]; first edition; this volume, which also covers various post-1989 appearances of the Doctor [notably the 1996 telemovie which featured both Sylvester McCoy and Paul McGann], is presumably the last in Virgin's "Handbook" series, the preceding six volumes of which have sold "close to 100,000 copies" according to the back-cover blurb.) *15th October 1998.*

James, Edward, and Farah Mendlesohn, eds. **The Parliament of Dreams: Conferring on Babylon 5.** "Foundation Studies in Science Fiction, 1." Science Fiction Foundation [c/o Prof. Edward James, Dept. of History, University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading, Berks. RG6 6AA], ISBN 0-07049-11922, iv+178pp, small-press paperback, £9. (Anthology of conference papers on the sf TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski; first edition; the conference was held at the University College of Ripon and York St John in December 1997; the contributors, mainly academics, include Stephen R. L. Clark, Nickianne Moody, Gareth A. Roberts [not the *Doctor Who* novelist, apparently], Andy Sawyer, both the editors, and various others whose names are not familiar in these quarters; physically, the book resembles an issue of *Foundation: The International Review of SF*, with which it no doubt shares a printer; recommended to all those who have followed the TV series in question – they say it is good [better than *Star Trek*, which outwardly it resembles], but you have either watched it or you haven't, and those of us who haven't can only look on in bemusement: no doubt we have all missed something significant.) *Late entry: August publication, received in September 1998.*

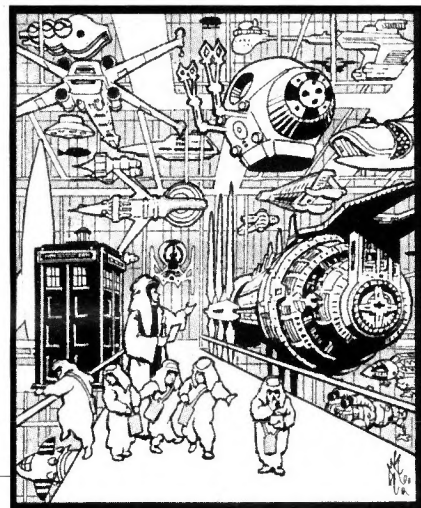
Parkin, Lance, and Mark Clapham. **Beige Planet Mars.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20529-4, 242pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Salvowski, £5.99. (Shared-universe sf

E. Vardeman and others; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 131.) *8th September 1998.*

Williamson, Jack. **The Prince of Space/The Girl from Mars.** "Gryphon Double Novel, #17." Gryphon [PO Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209, USA], ISBN 0-936071-96-6, 73+27pp, small-press paperback, covers by Alfred Klosterman, \$10. (Sf novella and short story, presented back-to-back; first edition; this is the first "Gryphon Double" we've ever seen, although apparently small-press publisher Gary Lovisi has already issued 16 of them; the attempt is to emulate the old Ace Doubles, with [in this case] simple black-on-red cover art; the hith-

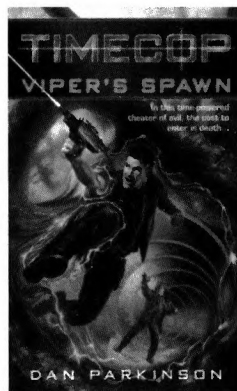
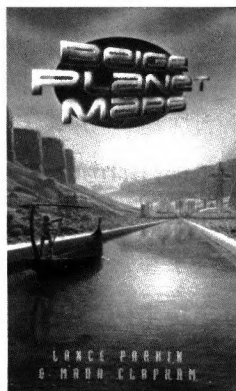
Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.



novel, featuring the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of *Doctor Who*]; first edition; unfortunately, we seem to have missed the previous volume in this now-bimonthly series, *Another Girl, Another Planet* by Martin Day and Len Beech [the latter a transparent pseudonym for Stephen Bowkett, aka horror writer "Ben Leech"] – which presumably was published in August 1998.) *15th October 1998.*

Parkinson, Dan. **Viper's Spawn.** "Timecop." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42195-7, 235pp, A-format



erto-never-reprinted novella "The Prince of Space" is from *Amazing Stories*, January 1931, while the short story "The Girl from Mars" [officially a collaboration with Miles J. Breuer, although Williamson claims to have done most of the writing] first appeared as a promotional booklet which Hugo Gernsback published in 1929 at the time he was launching *Science Wonder Stories*; clearly, these are very old, very pulpy works, but it's nice to have them available once more; the author, still alive and kicking after so many decades, has contributed a new one-page introduction to each piece.) *Late entry: June publication, received in September 1998.*

paperback, cover by Julie Bell, \$5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; it's based on the new Universal Television series *Timecop*, created by Mark Verheiden; however, it doesn't have a TV-photo cover: this piece of latter-day pulp fiction has a cover painting worthy of the old hero-pulp of the 1940s; on the accompanying review slip the author's name is given as "John Thomas" – is that a nonce-name that the publicists use when they don't know who a book is going to be by, or was it originally intended that this novel be marketed as by "John Thomas"?; whatever, it's by veteran western writer Parkinson.) *1st October 1998.*

Pratchett, Terry, and Phil Masters. **GURPS Discworld: Adventures on the Back of the Turtle.** Illustrated by Paul Kidby. Steve Jackson Games [Box 189S7, Austin, TX 78760, USA], ISBN 1-55634-261-6, 240pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Kidby, no price shown. (Fantasy role-playing game-rules, first edition; based on Pratchett's humorous novels, and copiously illustrated with black-and-white drawings, maps, etc., this is an American publication distributed in the UK; "GURPS" stands for Generic Universal Role-Playing System; it seems to provide a detailed and accurate guide to the Discworld, so Pratchett completists may want to have it even if they're not role-players; Phil Masters, it transpires, is the author or co-author of previous SJ Games books including *GURPS Archaic Nights* [that sounds interesting!] and *GURPS Places of Mystery*.) *Late entry: August publication sent to us by Phil Masters in September 1998.*

Weaver, Tom. **Science Fiction and Fantasy Film Flashbacks: Conversations with 24 Actors, Writers, Producers and Directors from the Golden Age.** McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0564-3, vii+351pp, hardcover, \$38.50. (Illustrated collection of interviews with sf/fantasy film directors, actors and other personnel; first edition; as with the prolific Weaver's five earlier collections, most of the material is reprinted from magazines such as *Starlog* and *Fangoria*; interviewees here include Lewis Allen, John Badham, Alan Caillou, Edward Dmytryk, Paul Mantee, Debra Paget and at least a dozen others, most of whose names will be obscure to all but sf movie completists; some of them have interesting tales to tell: the British-born Alan Caillou, who in addition to his acting and scriptwriting has written over 50 novels [mostly crime thrillers] sounds like a jolly soul; a nicely-produced book, in a larger format than the earlier Weaver volumes.) *November 1998.*

Wallace, Daniel. **Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Planets and Moons.** Illustrated by Brandon McKinney and Scott Kolins. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42068-3, xvii+204pp, very large-format paperback, \$18.95. (Illustrated guide to the imaginary worlds of the *Star Wars* sf-movie series created by George Lucas; first edition; fourth in the *Star Wars: Essential Guide* series.) *Late entry: 1st August publication, received in September 1998.*

NOESIS SF MAGAZINE – first issue now available! Fiction, fact, reviews, prize crossword etc. Annual (four-issue) subscription £10.50, single issue £2.75, available from Naesis, 61 Pengarth Rise, Falmouth, Cornwall TR11 2RR. Cheques payable to "Noesis." Work from new, and established authors, illustrators and cartoonists welcomed. Visit our website – <http://www.ndirect.ca.uk/~rwaddling/Naesis/index.html>

CARICATURE of you or friend/loved one in SF/F/Other costume. Full colour, any size. You send photo, suggest costume and setting. Ideal Christmas/Birthday present. Ring or write: Michael Stewart, Sleetmoor House, Sleetmoor Lane, Swanwick, Alfreton, Derbys. DE55 1RH (01773 603126).

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL: I will pay first-edition prices, or more, for the following Dobson reprint editions. *Far Stars* (2nd, about 1964 in d/w), *Men, Martians and Machines* (2nd, 1963 in d/w), *The Great Explosian* (2nd, 1963, and 3rd, 1966, both in near-fine/fine d/w). These books urgently needed to complete a set. Ring (0118) 986-9071, or write to: John Ingham, 41 Rosemary Avenue, Lower Earley, Reading, Berkshire RG6 5YQ.

SCHEHERAZADE MAGAZINE No. 17 out now. American Gothic, uneasy riders, were-things, damnation, redemption – even the scarecrows aren't what they seem. Stories from Sue Thomason, Lyn McConchie, Stepan Chapman and others. Sample issue £2.50 (£3.50 overseas). Four-issue subscription £8.50 (£10.50 overseas). Payable in sterling to Scheherazade, 14 Queens Park Rise, Brighton BN2 2ZF.

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL: All non-English editions of Russell's books urgently required. Write to: John Ingham, 41 Rosemary Avenue, Lower Earley, Reading, Berkshire RG6 5YQ, England.

SMALL ADS



AN ORIGINAL OIL PAINTING

from photograph, slide or print. Of your favourite sci-fi character, scene, dragon or anything you like. Any subject undertaken. For details, please send SAE to Dunn's Fine Art Originals, Dept. A2, 44 Reeve St., Lowestoft NR32 1UF.

SF ENCYCLOPEDIA CD-ROM. If you have this Grolier CD-ROM, David Langford's new viewer software can provide added speed, ease of use and extra searching power. Windows 95/98/NT only. £11.75 (or \$17.50) inclusive from 94 London Rd., Reading, RG1 5AU (e-mail enquiries: ansible@cix.ca.uk. More information: <http://www.ansible.deman.ca.uk/sfview/>).

FANTASTIC LITERATURE. Large, regular catalogues of quality science fiction, fantasy and horror for sale. Free lists: write now to Fantastic Literature, 35 The Ramparts, Rayleigh, Essex SS6 8PY.

SCI-FINDER. Register your web site at <http://www.sf-fantasy.cam/sfind.htm> – the dedicated SF/F search engine.

BOOKS – MAIL ORDER. Orbital Trading Post: the planet's largest on-line SF/F bookshop at <http://www.sf-fantasy.cam/otp.htm> – up to 40% off RRP!

HUGO AWARD-winning *Science Fiction Chronicle*, published since 1979, has all the news of US and UK publishing, plus reviews, interviews, forthcoming books, much, much more. Sample copy £3.50, subscription 12/£29 airmail from Algol Press, c/o R. Hansen, 144 Plashet Grove, E. Ham, London E6 1AB.

SF, HORROR, FANTASY paperback firsts/collectibles US & UK. Specialists in Howard, Burroughs, Dick, Brunner, Moorcock, Lovecraft, Doc Savage, Shadow, Pulp Heroes, but all pre-1980 authors represented. Send 50p SAE or \$2 cash for catalogues: Zardoz Books, 20 Whitecroft, Dilton Marsh, Westbury, Wiltshire BA13 4DJ.

FOR SALE: SF/F, horror, mysteries, etc. Books, magazines, comics. Thousands. Free search. Send wants. No obligation. Also buying. Write: John Schneider, 1500 Main Avenue, Kaukauna, WI 54130, USA.

CHRIS GILMORE doesn't just review... Have you a manuscript that needs just that little extra polish to be published? I offer honest opinions and expert attention at reasonable rates. Ring (01234-346142) or write: 27 Salisbury St., Bedford MK41 7RE.

BRIGHTON AREA readers of *Interzone* are welcome to join us on Friday nights at The Mitre, a friendly pub on Baker Street (near the Open Market). A few of us meet from 9-11pm, in the smaller of the two rooms, for informal drink and chat. You'll recognize us by the copies of *IZ* or other sf publications lying around – so come along and make yourselves known. (Editors.)

SMALL ADS in *Interzone* reach 10,000 people. If you wish to advertise please send your ad copy, together with payment, to *Interzone*, 217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. Rates: 25 pence per word, minimum of ten words, discount of 10% for insertions repeated in three issues (VAT is inclusive).



COMING NEXT MONTH

We mark the beginning of the last year of the 1990s with "The Gateway of Eternity," a highly imaginative short novel by Brian Stableford. Also in hand are more stories by new writers Tony Ballantyne and Alexander Glass, plus fiction by others – well-known and not-so-well-known – in addition to all our usual features and reviews. So look out for the January 1999 *Interzone*, number 139, on sale in December 1998.

TOM ARDEN

THE HARLEQUIN'S DANCE

First Book of the Orokon

An enthralling quest fantasy set in the mythical kingdom of El-Orok, a world of bandits and betrayal, of enchantment and evil, the debut of major new talent.

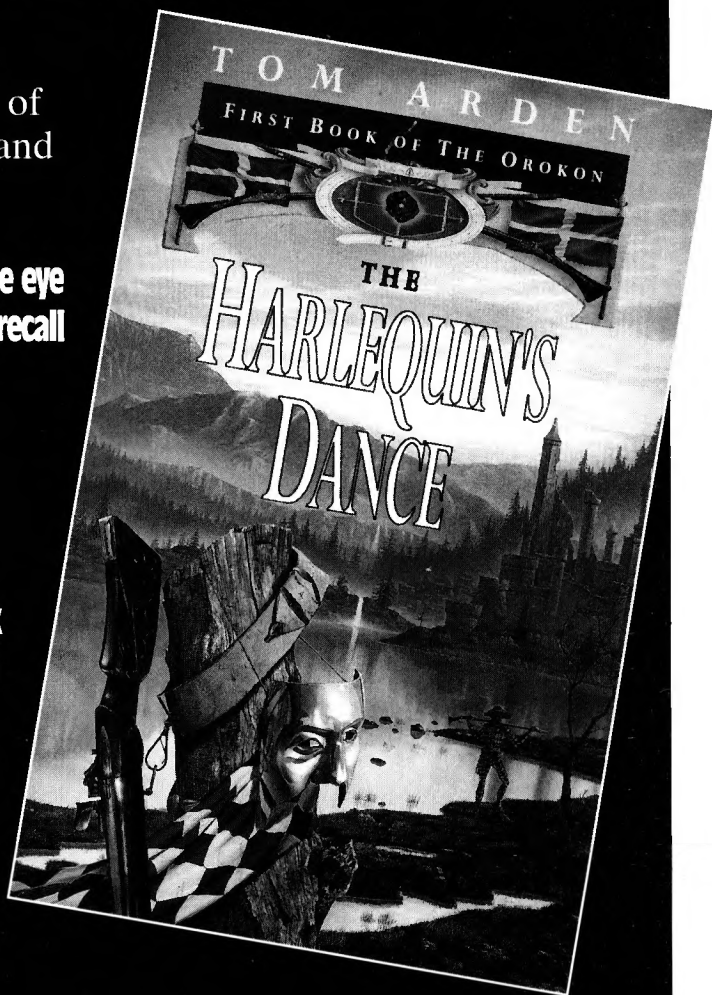
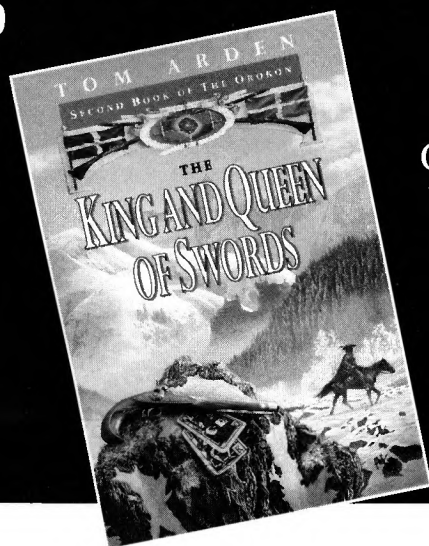
'Arden develops his tale skilfully ... he has a fine eye for the grotesque ... there are passages which recall Mervyn Peake and Jack Vance ... one to relish'
Interzone

'Full-blooded and vivid stuff'
Starburst

'Rich in atmosphere, builds to a stunning climax while putting a new twist to some well-trodden ground'
SFX



Out now in paperback
£5.99



Once there was a land with five evil kings, and each king had an evil queen, but most wicked of all and, above all, most feared were the King and Queen of Swords

GOLLANCZ **Coming in October £16.99**

WINNER OF MORE HUGO AWARDS
THAN ANY OTHER 90'S WRITER

Lois McMaster **BUJOLD**

K o m a r r

From the Queen

of 90's SF, Lois

McMaster Bujold,

comes a brilliant
new space opera.

available now
from all good
bookshops
£5.99



E A R T H L I G H T

Here, now, and in the future